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Dog Training & Behavior Services

Canine Play: Appropriate vs. Inappropriate Play

That's just how he plays" is a phrase that can be often heard at dog parks. Just because "that's how he plays" that doesn't mean it's appropriate play or that your dog is supposed to like it or deal with it! I had a personal experience with this at my local dog park. I was just walking along with my dogs and my dad's Rottweiler mix, Mya. Very quickly and assertively a cattle dog mix came running up full speed and tackled Mya, biting her neck and making a lot of noise. Mya very submissively rolled and squealed. I said "Hey!" clapped my hands loudly and shooed the dog off saying "Get out of here!". From half way across the park a woman yells rudely "She's just playing!" I chose to walk away rather than have an unpleasant conversation. That dog may have indeed been "just playing" (the dog did not intend harm) but it was extremely inappropriate and very scary for my dog, even though she is quite good with other dogs.

So this prompts the question, how do you know what is appropriate vs. inappropriate play?

Let's start off with what the initial greeting should look like. Dog's should approach each other very loosely and indirectly (well socialized dogs will do a slight arc, never approaching directly nose to nose), without staring or direct eye contact. The greeting ideally should start with butt sniffing and can include nose sniffing as well. During this process you should not see any freezing (dog stops moving completely), the bodies should remain fairly loose, circling, play bowing, etc. Dog's with poor social skills may not greet like this, and that doesn't necessarily mean they will be aggressive, but it does mean to proceed with caution. If I see my dogs approach a dog with poor social skills, I will quickly say, "Ok, lets go" and move away with my dogs. Not

only does it keep my dog's safe, but it helps that dog have more good experiences.

Different dogs have very different play styles. Some are very rowdy with a lot of body slamming and mouthing, while others prefer low to no contact play. Some are very vocal, growling and barking (which is ok as long as the other dog is comfortable with it), others very quiet. This can make it difficult to tell whether or not the play is appropriate. **The best way to tell is BOTH dogs continue to be willing participants.** If you separate them, they will both come back to play once released. If only one is returning to play, the other is likely done and the dogs should be separated to avoid the dog that is done from becoming frustrated and snapping at the other dog to tell him to "knock it off!"

Contrary to popular belief, growling, snarling and air snapping can actually be a good thing if the dog uses it appropriately. A well socialized dog will offer these behaviors as warnings, communicating that they do not like what is going on (a dog playing too rough for instance). A dog that skips these behaviors is much more dangerous, and for this reason you never want to punish these behaviors, simply remove your dog from the situation. If you punish the growl, your dog will skip it entirely and when frustrated go straight for an attack.

Good playmates can vary in size, age and breed, but their styles of play should be similar. Good play typically involves chasing, parallel running, rolling around, play bowing, throwing paws around, and brief pounces at one another. You will also see dogs using their mouths to "bite" one another, but these are play bites and the dogs are using a soft mouth to be sure the other dog is not hurt. If a lot of the mouthing is directed at the dog's neck, proceed with



caution. A little mouthing here and there is okay, but it should not be the dogs primary focus.

Another great thing to watch for is the dogs taking brief pauses in their play. They both stop for just a moment, then resume play. This is a dogs way of checking in to make sure everything is still going well and to calm the situation. Good playmates will do this often.

To see this information in action and watch some videos, visit my blog at www.luckypawsmn.wordpress.com and search "play."

Additional Resources:

- Language of Dogs (DVD)
 - Sarah Kalnajs
- Calming Signals (DVD)
 - Turid Rugaas
- Body Language of Canine Play
 - Terry Ryan
- Dog Play (Book)
 - Patricia McConnell
- Canine Body Language (Book)
 - Brenda Aloff

These books and DVD's can be found on either Amazon.com or Dogwise.com

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Dog Park Do's & Don'ts

Dog parks can be a fabulous place for you to exercise your dog and for your dog to socialize, but they can also be a scary place for a fearful dog, or an unsafe place if there are owners who bring dogs who really should not be there.

One negative experience with a dog can forever scar your dog and create both fear and aggression (the best defense is a good offense). Dog's may also learn bullying play styles that can lead to other problems.

I have put together a bit of information for you so that you and your dog can have plenty of pleasant dog park experiences and avoid any potential negative experiences.

Do: Determine whether or not your dog is a good fit for a dog park. Not every dog is a good fit for a dog park, and that's ok. Fearful or shy dogs may not be a good fit for a dog park during peak hours when there are a lot of dogs there. Young puppies are also not a good fit for dog parks. Not only should your puppy be fully vaccinated before going to a dog park, but they should also be confident enough to stick up for themselves. If your puppy rolls over and squeals easily during interactions with other dogs, they may not be ready for the dog park.

Don't: Try to bring your dog to the dog park to work on socialization issues. Work with a trainer or behaviorist in a controlled environment with well known dogs in order to address any fearful, reactive or aggressive behavior.

Do: Learn how to read dog body language and learn what is appropriate vs. inappropriate play. The more educated you are, the better you can keep your dog safe.

Don't: Listen to other attendees in the park who may not understand their or your dog's needs or understand canine play and body language. Instead, educate yourself from dog professionals.

Do: Teach your dog to come when called reliably. It is vital that you can call your dog out of play that may be inappropriate. Also, if a fight breaks out, you want to be able to call your dog away so they don't become involved.

Don't: Believe that dogs can "work it out" if you just let them do so. If your dog is growling, snarling or air snapping at another dog and that other dog is not listening, protect your pooch and get them out of there before they feel the need to take things further. Young puppies often do not listen to reprimands well. If the other dog respects the warning, that is great, but don't allow it to go any further.

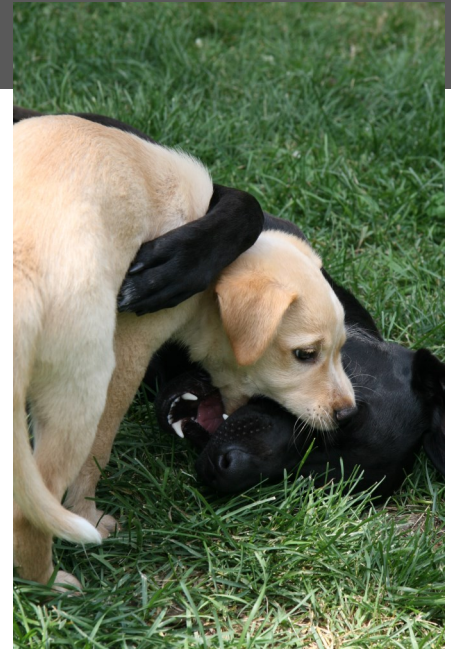
Do: Check out the entrance before entering to make sure there aren't dogs congregating there. It can be very stressful for a single dog to come into a pack of dogs right as they enter. Some dogs may also become territorial of the park which can cause fights at the gate.

Don't: Congregate with other dog owners and chat. Many fights happen when there are large groups of dogs and humans just standing around due to the fact that they don't have enough personal space and owners are often not paying enough attention to their dogs.

Do: Keep moving. Even if you go to a small park (bigger is better), continue walking the perimeter and encourage your dog to follow you. You may stop for short play sessions with other dogs, but your best bet is to keep moving to avoid altercations.

Do: Remove your dog if it is bullying others or if it appears afraid.

Don't: Force your pup to play with a dog he doesn't naturally want to play with.



Do: Leave special toys at home to avoid resource guarding.

Don't: Let all the dogs in the park know that you have treats. If you are working on training, only feed treats when no other dogs are near you, bring non smelly treats and keep them in a high pocket. Also, keep your distance from large groups of dogs.

Do: Encourage your dog to walk away from a dog who may be growling, snarling or snapping at him.

Don't: Assume that dog is aggressive when he is only trying to communicate it's discomfort.

Overall, the most important aspect is to educate yourself so that you know what to look for when you are trying to spot problems in play. This is the best way to keep your dog safe.

On the other side of this page, canine play is explained, however it is always best to see it in action. Check out my blog at www.luckypawsmn.com/ wordpress and search "play" to watch some excellent videos on dog play & body language.