



Creedons College

Adult Education in the Pet Industry

Professional Dog Training Instructor

Module 2 – Canine Communication, Interpretation and Human Behaviour

Lesson 2 – Interpreting Dog – Dog Communication and Play

Part 2 - Play



Terminating Play / Rejecting Play Invitation



A fearful or disinterested dog may choose not to interact. This should absolutely always be respected by the other dog, and if the other dog proceeds to 'mug' the dog rejecting interaction, then in most cases human intervention is necessary. In interactions between a puppy and a calm / well socialised older dog it is often acceptable to allow the pup continue to mug the other dog until the other dog administers correction behaviours. If the pup continues to ignore correction and warning behaviours, then you must remove the pup (heap praise on the adult dog) and make a point of introducing this pup to larger (safe) adult dogs where that pup may be more likely to listen.

Giant breed puppies often become muggers, as a large St. Bernard puppy can get away with ignoring the communication of a smaller dog, so giant breed dogs need lots of early socialisation with large breed dogs who would be intolerant of puppy play.



Behaviours that are attempting to terminate play include

Avoidance behaviours

Averted eye contact, a head turns or moving away are all communication behaviours that are rejecting an interaction.

The dog may also turn its rump toward the other dog to stop requests for play.

Dismissing Snarl

The dog will snarl with an open mouth while turning its head away from the other dog.

Frustrated Bark

Similar to correction behaviours, the frustrated bark will be given to tell the other dog to stop interacting.



Muzzle Grasp

This correction behaviour when a dog is trying to solicit play is a signal that the dog does not want to play.

Shake Off

If the dog is being 'bothered' you might see a shake off after it moves away, and the other dog gives it space. This shows you that the dog was slightly distressed by the previous encounter and that it understands that the engagement is over.

No Greeting

Familiar dogs can often skip the greeting behaviour. They may recognise each other from a distance and play (or avoidance, fight and so on) can begin straight away without the need to become acquainted.

Familiar friendly dogs will often rush through the greeting ritual to 'catch up' to basically sniff out what that dog has been up to

Interpreting Play



Once two dogs have greeted, and have decided that they 'like' one another, play will often follow.

There are different 'games' that dogs will play. All of the below games are appropriate provided arousal levels are relatively low, dogs remain responsive to human interjection, and both dogs are willing participants.

Wrestling

Dogs will get on the floor and play fight in wrestling manner.

You will see pinning but it should just be momentary.

You will hear grumbling and noise but the tone should stay low and grumbling stay quiet.

You will see lots of mouthing around the neck where the dog takes a chunk of skin and pulls at it softly without causing pain.

Mouthing toward the muzzle has the mouth open, and the muzzle often is positioned beside, not over, the other dogs muzzle

You will see bouncy exaggerated movement

Wrestling is also carried out when the dogs are tired, or calm, where the wrestling involves more use of the paws, and slows in nature.

Play Fight

Dogs will, when standing, attempt to bite each other. You may see a paw over and a chin over in a playful manner and both dogs often do so. Play fighting can proceed to become wrestling or chase.

Stalking

Stalking often elicits chase. When stalking is acceptable it is directed toward a dog that is also aware, and willing to engage in the play. The stalk will often be mirrored by the second dog,

as they engage in a game of 'chicken'. Both dogs freeze, hold direct eye contact, crouch low and begin to very slowly approach before the tension breaks in to chase.

It is often seen in herding breeds such as collies. If the chase becomes obsessive, or the dogs being stalked show displacement or avoidance behaviours the play should be interrupted. Some obsessive stalkers become distressed when around groups of dogs as they cannot rest, and continually stalk and attempt to herd the other dogs.

The stalking dog will have extremely focused eye contact, will carry the head low and will move from side to side, pacing and keeping the dog inside the group of dogs. Herding dogs often pace the perimeter of their surroundings.

Chase

Chase is a common game that dogs will engage in but must be observed very closely to ensure it doesn't escalate to panic mode or become predatory drift.



Dogs will often take turns being the chaser, or the chased. You should see direction change and the speed should remain moderate. Any ankle biting means the play should be interrupted immediately. If the dog being chased stops abruptly, the chaser should also stop and give the chased dog space.

Body Slam

Body slam play is a good game, provided both dogs are willing participants. Dogs alternate between biting, and twisting to hit the other dog with their bum. They can also run toward each other, or parallel to each other, making contact with their shoulders and hips. This play is seen a lot in teenagers walking down school halls, it's cheeky, but fun provided both dogs are willing!

Cat-Like

Tactile, paw oriented play is often seen in tired, shy or small dogs where they gently paw one another, touching each other on the body, or holding with the paws.

Good Play Behaviours

Self-Handicapping

This is seen when a dog makes itself weaker, smaller, or less of a threat to another dog to make play fairer, or encourage a disinterested dog to play.

A large dog may lie down to play with a smaller, a strong dog may offer a tug toy to a smaller, and not pull at full strength, and so on.



Lateral Movements

Head on approach and confrontational can be misinterpreted as threatening. Play with lots of lateral movements, curved approach, and parallel movements means that the play remains play, and is not perceived as a threat.

Curved posture

The dog's body remains soft and curved throughout play. This is more evident in longer dogs such as a retriever. If you imagine the dog's spine, it is continually curving as the hips and shoulders move to keep their bodies fluid.

Mirroring

Both dogs mirror each other's behaviour. One dog lies down so the other lies. One dog does a play bow so the other mirrors. This is polite communication of willingness to interact.

Bum Shuffle

The dog, mid play, twists to turn its bum toward the other dog. This shows that the dog does not want to fight.

Nibbling

Biting of the other dog without using force. Sometimes misinterpreted as dangerous or aggressive, but the other dog is enjoying the interaction and often responds.

Role Reversal

It is very important to see role reversal during play. Each dog takes turns to play as the offensive and defensive dog. Wrestling dogs take turns being on top, chasing dogs take turns being chased, stalking dogs take turns being the 'sheep' and so on. This is important both for learning and communication, and to ensure that the play is fair and neither dog feels like the constant victim.

Pauses

Short pauses every 30sec – 1min are essential in maintaining appropriate play. Play continues to escalate as the energy levels increase, and play can be thought of like a spiralling tornado where it can escalate to a fight. Short pauses allow for adrenaline and arousal levels to drop a little, preventing too much escalation.

Pausing also provides a check in opportunity where both dogs can stop, see if either performs avoidance behaviours, then the play can begin again.

If you do not see pauses being offered, or if one dog pauses and the other keeps going, intervention is necessary.

Exaggerated Movement

Play movements are big, bouncy, and exaggerated. This helps the dogs understand that the signals are play and not serious. Serious behaviours would have subtle movements as the animal reserves energy, whereas play can be exaggerated to burn off energy. Leaping, spinning, changing direction, standing on two legs and bouncing pounces are all exaggerated.



Play Bow

A play bow is when the dog places its paws outright, it's elbows are lowered to the floor and its bum is held high with the tail also high and soft.

Often come as an invitation to play, prior to a 'rude' behaviour, the dog does a play bow then a paw over, or a chin over, to say "I mean no harm". A bounce bow is often seen to really beg the other dog to play (please, please, please). The dog displays a play bow then bounces back upright.

Muzzle Nudge

Unlike a muzzle punch that is an aggressive behaviour, a muzzle nudge is similar to cat-like pawing where the dog gently touches the other dog with their muzzle in an invitation to play.

Exaggerated Approach and Withdrawal

The dog approaches toward the other dog (the other dog is normally disinterested in playing) barks toward the other dog, possibly paws at the dog or does a muzzle nudge) then runs away and allows space for the other dog to approach or chase.

Back Roll

The dog rolls on its back in the hopes to elicit wrestle play.

Borderline Play Behaviours

Stiffness

If you notice either or both dogs become tense, they are likely to be entering a heightened state of arousal, or unsure for some reason.

Often reassuring both dogs calmly can get rid of the tension and allow the dogs to return to what they were doing (or be separated should you believe necessary). Think of two sisters squaring up to each other in an argument, and both people go still, frowning at one another, if someone says “girls, ye love each other really and you’re always there for each other when needed” they are likely to both soften, so addressing stiffness with calm soothing praise is often enough to ‘burst’ the bubble.

Speed

If play becomes high speed and the dogs are performing at 100% capability this means that the arousal is likely to increase and the communications could be misinterpreted. Dogs should play at about 75% of their capability, so if speed increases, interrupt, take a break by giving the dog a time out, or engage in a bit of positive reinforcement training where either dog focuses on the person for a short time before returning to play at a calmer level. If speed is 100% again when returning to play, terminate the play session.

Arousal

We have discussed arousal a lot, and you are aware of the physiological signs of heightened arousal / panic (piloerection, pupil dilation, dry panting etc.) interject and give the dogs a time out. Monitor the arousal at all times.

You will get a sixth sense and ‘feel’ heightened arousal the more time you spend observing play.

Barking

Barking should be minimal during play. You often only hear barking if a dog becomes too aroused, is hurt, or is frustrated (often a third dog trying to get into the game, or the playmate has hidden). All of these situations require play to terminate so always interrupt if you hear barking.



Tap out

We know what a tap out is. If you see a tap out during play, take away the other dog(s) and allow the dog who performed the tap out the choice to approach or perform avoidance behaviours.

Muzzle Nudging / Pawing

Muzzle nudge or pawing is an invitation to play, but if it is rejected it should stop, so if the dog continues to approach and move away, or muzzle punch or paw, call that dog away and give them time to calm.

Pinning

Pinning is appropriate if it is only for a moment and the instant the dog being pinned objects the dog on top must bounce off immediately. If a dog objects to pinning and the pinning continues interruption is needed immediately as the pinned dog can, and will, panic very quickly.

Kill Bite / Bite Hold

Doing a kill bite (taking a hold of a leg or flesh and shaking the head) or a bite hold (taking a hold of leg or flesh and holding it firmly) are both play behaviours once they are minimal and responsive to the other dogs signalling. If they are prolonged they must be interrupted.

Brief Standing 2-Legged

When dog play is excitable, they can often stand on two legs for a moment while interacting. If this becomes excessive interruption may be needed as play escalates.

Shake Off

During play a shake off tells you you've missed something! Should the dog do a shake off, think about what had just happened, why could it have distressed the dog, and how could you avoid it happening again.

Any Displacement Behaviours

You know by now that displacement behaviours show you the dog is conflicted and unsure how to respond. When you see displacement behaviours the dog needs space, so ideally the other dogs will respect that and allow space. If not, you must create space.

Inappropriate Play Behaviours



Humping

Humping is seen in play but is an inappropriate play behaviour. You must interrupt and give the humping dog a time out even if the other dog has tolerated it. Humping often results in an aggressive response from the other dog, so allowing a dog to hump a tolerant dog is

dangerous as they learn that the behaviour is rewarded, though when they hump a less tolerant dog they could get themselves in trouble.

Paw Over

Similar to humping, a paw over is usually inappropriate unless dogs are carrying out role reversal and are tolerating it and if it is introduced attentively. If a dog performs paw overs early into the play interaction it can elicit an aggressive response so should be discouraged.



Chin Over

Chin over is again the same as a paw over or mounting. The dog may do a chin over when the other dog is laying or has done a back roll. Some dogs will tolerate it but it is a rude behaviour and if it is tolerated it will mistakenly teach the dog that it is acceptable resulting in increased risk in future interactions. It should always be interrupted.

Ankle Mouthing

Certain breeds, such as herding breeds, are more prone to ankle mouthing than others. The dog nips on the ankle of another dog, often seen in chase, or when two dogs are playing the third dog does an ankle mouthing behaviour or nip. It often results in fear or aggression in the other dog and is an unfair behaviour so should be 'punished' with a time out to decrease the behaviour.



Hard Stare

A hard stare during play is similar to stalking but slightly more confrontational. It may be seen with low growling. It is a very challenging behaviour and inappropriate during play so must be 'punished' with a time out.

Ignored Communication

This is obvious, but if a dog is ignoring the communication of another dog who is requesting space then the play is inappropriate (as both dogs are not willing participants) so must be interrupted.

Often the communication of small dogs, or dogs performing displacement behaviours is ignored by both dogs and humans, so your role as a skilled observer is to interrupt.

Guidelines for Interactions

Below are some more guidelines for promoting safe play.

Good Play Matches

While all of the play behaviours and guidelines are generic amongst all breeds, it is still important to respect that not all dogs are made the same. Some breeds prefer different play styles, and size, play style and build makes for potentially dangerous interactions (please remember there are absolutely always exceptions, but it is always wise to err on the side of caution).

Large dogs should not play with small dogs as a rule of thumb, as they can accidentally injure them.

Stocky dogs should not play with fragile dogs, as a rule of thumb, so dogs with delicate legs, such as Italian greyhounds may be similar height to a Staffordshire terrier playmate, but many terriers enjoy body slamming whereas Italian greyhounds are vulnerable to broken legs.

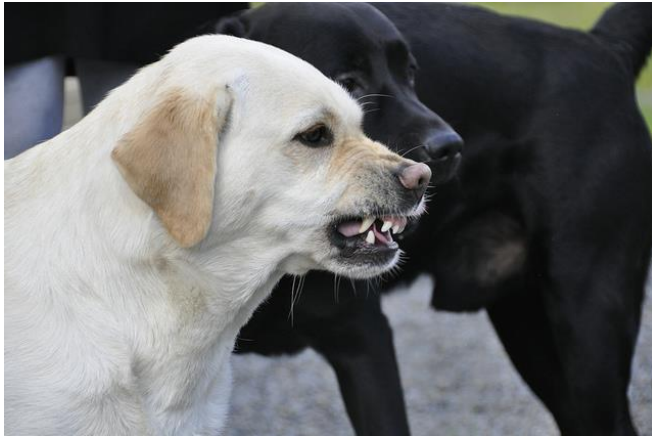
Dogs with strong hunting behaviours should not play with dogs that look like prey. Maltese, when compared to other breeds, are more prone to squealing when startled in a prey like fashion. They are one of the more common breeds killed, or badly injured, by other dogs, often as it elicits a predatory response in the other dog.

Serious care must be taken when matching suitable play mates for dogs.

Tension

Soft, curved movement is good, stiff movement is bad. The stiffer or more staccatic the play, the higher the arousal.

Tense atmosphere is bad. If the hairs are standing on the back of your neck, and you don't know why, go with your gut. Always.



Trust Dogs

Trust the doggie expert. If a new dog arrives to a play group and the regulars don't like the new dog, or your bomb proof super socialised dog avoids a new dog, and you don't see any obvious reason for it, trust the dogs. There may be something hormonally that is communicating to the other dogs that

this dog is not a suitable playmate, or you may be missing something subtle so if the other dogs do not think the dog is a suitable playmate then they probably aren't.

Play Splitters

Play splitters are dogs that get in between to interacting dogs. Some will do so to try to engage in the play, but many dogs will take on the role of peace makers and, as social species, they want to protect the harmony of the group so will attempt to calm dogs in heightened states of arousal.

These dogs are fantastic assets to supervising play as they will point out situations you have overlooked, though this can become stressful for the play splitter if they have to do your job for you.



When a play splitter interrupts play praise them, then deal with the situation you have missed. If they are going into 'supervisor' role and are getting involved in play where it is unnecessary you may need to take them away from the free play.

Extra Tips

Growling during play is ok and normal. Many people misinterpret it as a fight but it is perfectly fine – provided it doesn't escalate and the arousal levels are moderate.

Third wheels never make for good play scenarios. Should a third wheel try to engage in play they often carry out inappropriate behaviours to elicit a reaction, or become frustrated with heightened arousal.

Should you notice a third wheel try to join two dogs playing, distract them or find a suitable play mate.

Start as you mean to go on. A bad greeting can result in an instant dislike for interactions with another dog. A slow and steady interdiction can save a lot of grief later. If introducing new housemates, it should always be in a neutral location, where the dogs are taken for a parallel walk, gradually decreasing distance, then allowing safe off leash greeting should their body language imply both dogs are happy to do so.

Continual hypervigilance is vital when observing dog interactions. Eyes on the back of your head is the motto, and all dogs engaging in interactions need to be observed to correctly interpret their emotional state.

Interrupt and Reward play regularly. This will show dogs that the humans in the area are also important, and by stopping play to reward, perhaps ask for a sit, and allow play continue will keep arousal levels lower and keep the dog 'thinking'.

Collar Grabs should be carried out as part of play supervision training. Randomly, gently, take the dogs collar when they don't expect it, deliver a very high value reward, release and walk away.

Repeating this regularly with a dog that will be playing off leash with other dogs very much helps the dog to learn to associate being grabbed with good things. This means that if arousal increases and play becomes out of control the dog should not bite the carer when grabbed.

Predatory drift is the term used to describe when a dog enters the predatory sequence of behaviours. This sequence includes

Eye – the dog locks focus

Stalk – the dog creeps forward

Chase – the dog takes chase

Grab bite – the dog pinches its jaws down on the prey and holds steady

Kill bite – the dog shakes its head from side to side vigorously to kill the prey

Dissect bite – the dog rips the prey apart, exposing organs, removing feathers and so on

Consume – the dog eats the prey

All dogs have the ability to do all behaviours in the sequence, though some are easily triggered to enter predatory drift state. Once dogs focus on a prey it can be almost impossible to break their focus, and this can be fatal in a dog play environment.

All dogs must be safely monitored for their likelihood to enter this state, and any predatory 'eye' behaviour must be treated as an emergency, and interrupted immediately. The dog should be removed from the play group.

No means no! A yelp in fear or pain means play must stop, no exceptions. If the dogs don't stop themselves, you must interrupt.

Safe Intervention

A fight will often end before either dog is seriously injured. However, every year many serious bites occur to humans who separate dog fights. As two dogs are fighting, they are completely focused on one another. They know how far away the other dog is, so how close they can put their mouth and so on. When a hand appears unexpectedly in close proximity the dog is more likely to inflict a more serious bite to this hand than to the other dog's body which they are already focusing on.

Human safety is always paramount to dog safety, and often a dog that inflicts a bite to a human is put to sleep whereas a bit to another dog is tolerated much better by the authorities.

When observing two dogs interacting it is important you equip yourself with equipment, and knowledge, to step in if it goes wrong.

The golden rule is REMAIN CALM. Shrieking or running can escalate the arousal of the dogs rapidly. So swift movement, deep tones to your voice and remaining calm is vital.

Should play become borderline inappropriate, use your voice, and training to distract the dog. Have a safe word – din dins, let's go, walkies and so on, that the dogs know means something great is about to happen. This will keep their focus on the trainer.

If play escalates and dogs are unresponsive to cues, toss treats in their general area. A fist full of dry food will generally bounce and get their attention. The eating provides distraction and allows you to put the leash back on the more aroused dog.



When treats don't work, an air horn, or 'pet corrector' can be kept for emergencies. Get close to the dogs

and direct the sound in their area to break their focus. This is for more serious situations where you are concerned for safety and should not be done regularly as dogs would become desensitised to the sound.

A bucket of water, sand, or a heavy blanket can be thrown over fighting dog to distract them, so should be readily available in areas where dogs play.

A sweeping brush or mop can also be used to separate the dogs or give them something to redirect on to, to allow you to separate the dogs safely.