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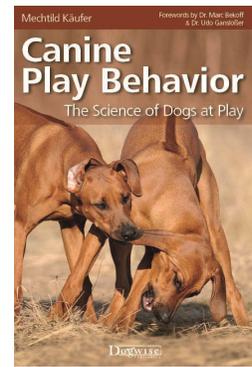
Canine Play Behavior – The Science of Dogs at Play

Section 1—Behavior: The

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Play is not just play.

Gordon M. Burghardt

What is play exactly and why do dogs play? First, it is important to point out what play is not. Play is not, as is so often stated, the opposite of serious. For humans and dogs the importance of play is significant, deserves to be taken seriously, and is often underappreciated. The importance of play is better reflected in Sigmund Freud's classification: "The opposite of play is not what is serious, but what is real" (1907/08); or in the words of Stuart Brown, a psychiatrist and founder of the National Institute for Play in the USA: "The opposite of play is not work—the opposite of play is depression" (2009, p. 126). As we will see later, science considers play to be not only an activity, but also a state of mind, in the same way that dreams are another form of non-reality. We will start by looking at play as an observable, objectively descriptive activity before then examining it as a state of mind. So, after first analyzing what play *looks* like, we will then examine what play *feels* like.

That's the curious thing about play—we can all tell when dogs are playing. Yet it is extremely difficult to define play, particularly in the gray areas, when anger or fear is involved in play fighting, when a playful chase turns into predatory behavior, or when a relaxing ball game turns into an obsession. So, before we look at play in dogs, it is a good idea to define as precisely as possible what we actually mean by the word play.

Definition of play

Let's start with the bad news. There is no *one* definition of what play is. Although there has practically been an explosion in the number of research studies on play over recent years, no one can yet explain what the actual biological function of play is. No one has yet presented conclusive evidence of what advantages in terms of survival and reproduction play gives animals. For this reason, most definitions limit themselves to describing as precisely as possible what happens during play. In the absence of a functional definition, such a structural definition provides a useful rule of thumb for separating canine play from other activities such as stereotyped behaviors or ritualized aggression that, at first glance, appear to be similar. The following definition comes from Gordon M. Burghardt, a scientist working on the origins and the evolution of play behavior:

"Play is repeated incompletely functional behavior differing from more serious versions structurally, contextually, or ontogenetically, and initiated voluntarily when the animal is in a relaxed or low-stress setting" (Burghardt 2005, p. 82).

No such thing as "play drive"

Dogs have very few purely innate behaviors.

Practically the entire repertoire of canine behaviors consists of a combination of innate elements and learning experience. For this reason, modern literature no longer uses terms such as "drive" or "instinct." The more thoroughly science investigates animal play, the more differentiated play is considered to be. There is no such thing as a play drive. Rather, canine play is steered by a number of independent motivators. There are at least three separate play systems that emerge in juvenile animals at different times: object play, play predation, and social play. We now also know that dog-dog play and human-dog play are motivated in different ways, and that these forms of play complement, and do not replace, each other.

Motivation for a certain type of behavior during play is different to the motivation for the same behavior outside of the play context. For example, mounting during play is mostly not sexually motivated, and during a play fight the aim is not to defeat the opponent. There are different motivations underlying the various forms of play (Pellis 2004). While an enlarged amygdala and hypothalamus is associated with more social play, it does not result in more object play or locomotor play (Pellis 2009). Manipulation of the opioid system caused a reduction in social play, but had no effect on object or locomotor play (Pellis 2004).

Burghardt sees play as a category of behavior in which behavioral traits are pooled whose characteristics are only superficially similar, but which differentiate from each other in terms of origin, causation, function, and ontogeny (individual development) (Burghardt 1998). Researchers even argue that play could have a different function for each species of animal (Pellis 2009).

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