

An excerpt from

Play With Your Dog

Chapter 2 – Plays Well With Others

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The Play's the Thing

Watching puppies play is inarguably one of the most delightful and amusing pastimes on earth. Still, there are reasons for puppy-play that are far more compelling than simply making dog owners and the dog gods chuckle. The role of play in a canid's development has been well-studied by ethologists (someone who studies animal behavior, especially as it occurs in its natural environment). But what, exactly, *is* play?

One response might be, "Like pornography, I may not be able to define it, but I know it when I see it." Surprisingly, however, some people (both dog owners and non-dog owners) are frighteningly poor at identifying dog play. Some perceive perfectly appropriate "dog play" as dangerous, while others are oblivious to the risks they're taking by allowing their dogs to engage in play that encourages and reinforces inappropriate behaviors.

When it came time for the first night of after-class playtime in a recent good manners class of mine, the owner of an adolescent poodle mix was clearly quite distressed. She was extremely reluctant to allow Luna to play. Her dog, she told us, was quite aggressive toward other dogs. She'd tried allowing her to play with friends' dogs, but had always stopped the play immediately because her dog was biting. I was surprised at her comments, as Luna had done quite well in class and not demonstrated any behavior that raised any red flags for me.

I'm not one to lightly discount an owner's observations or concerns about her dog's behavior. However, I convinced Luna's owner to let her dog play with one other dog in a very controlled environment.

As we watched, the dogs began a session of perfectly normal play, including some mouthing and play-growling. The owner's face paled, and in a panic she exclaimed, "See? See? That's what I mean!"

I quickly reassured her that the dogs were play-biting-and-growling, and that there was no cause for alarm. Somewhat dubious, she agreed to allow the play to continue. Over time, she realized that her beloved dog's behavior was perfectly normal and acceptable, and was thrilled that Luna could play well with others. In another case, a family came to see me for a private consult with their 2-year-old Jack Russell Terrier. The dog had recently bitten their 11-year-old son's face, inflicting a wound that required five sutures. Since the

time Scooter was a puppy, the family's two children, then 5-and-9, now 7-and-11, were allowed to play roughly with the dog, pulling his legs; running away and screaming when the pup chased after them biting at their heels; tossing a blanket over him and roughing him up through the blanket; grabbing his ball away from him; and hugging and kissing the little dog, even when Scooter snarled a protest. It was the hug and kiss that had elicited the bite to the boy's lip, *after* the boy ignored the warning snarl and kissed the dog again.

Since at least some of us humans seem to be not-so-good at correctly identifying play, let's see how some ethologists define it. Gordon Burghardt, Ph.D., at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, offers the following 5-point definition of play:

1. Performance of the behavior is not completely functional in the context in which it is expressed.
2. Play behavior is spontaneous, voluntary, intentional, pleasurable, rewarding, or done for its own sake (only one of these need apply).
3. Play differs from "serious" performance of a behavior in at least one respect—it is incomplete, exaggerated, awkward, precocious, or involves behavior patterns with modified form, sequencing, or targeting.
4. Behavior is performed repeatedly, in similar, but not rigidly, stereotyped form.
5. Play is initiated when animals are adequately fed, healthy, and free from stress—they are in a "relaxed field." Play is one of the first behaviors to cease when animals are hungry, threatened, or under environmental stress.

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