



Understanding Canine Play **by Dr Nicole Lobry De Bruyn (Animal Sense)**

Canines are a social species that do like to play, sometimes even into old age. As a species becomes domesticated there is a tendency for neotony. This means there is retention of juvenile characteristics into adult hood. Dogs can engage in play throughout their lives with their people and known associates. Some play more than others.

Young dogs, up until the age of about 2 years old, can be very intent on canine play. At around two to three years old dogs become socially mature and some changes in brain structure are occurring. This is a time when most behaviour-related disease manifests itself.

All dogs are individuals and some dogs may not like to play as much as others. Some breeds are less social. Some dogs have lacked socialisation or had poor experience. Knowing your dog's play style can be useful in picking the appropriate dog playmates for your canine.



Just because dogs are social animals does not mean that your dog will like and want to socialise with every dog he meets. Accepting that an older dog is less social than he used to be can sometimes be the best way of avoiding conflict

It can be especially hard for dogs to communicate in dog-savvy ways when on lead and approaching another dog face-to-face. Many dogs will find this encounter confronting. Older dogs may find the energetic nature of puppies annoying and snap at them to indicate they don't want to play. This can be normal canine communication.

It is not normal however for dogs to inflict serious injury on one another. If your dog develops dog reactivity at the sight of other dogs – eg lunging, barking and snapping behaviour it can be a sign of anxiety-related illness. Normal dogs do not feel the need to behave in such extreme ways. You need to seek help to modify this behaviour.

Normal dog greeting involves respectful sniffing of each other's rears for a short three-second period. Bodies should be soft, perhaps with a low tail wag. Signs of stiffness, tension in ears, face or even a freeze may be an indicator of a dog being uncomfortable. An invitation to play with a play bow may be a signal to another dog to continue the interaction.



A play bow is the well-recognised signal between dogs that invites play. It tells others that what comes next is fun and, even though the dog may be barking, putting his teeth on the other dog's skin or rough – this is still play.

Some dogs may chase, others may tumble. Play styles can differ depending on what the breed has been developed to do. Herding breeds like to chase, and can be ball-focused. Some dogs can be so ball-focused they no longer are interested in other canine play mates. Bully breeds like to play tug and rough and tumble. Some dogs may be frightened by this style. Signs of good play are the swapping of roles, small stops and breaks in play and shake-offs (when the dog shakes as if wet). Dogs may stop playing and sniff the ground to diffuse tension or offer displacement signs like a “look away” (averting gaze) if they are feeling overwhelmed.

Normal dogs may back off and let the play halt for a few seconds before offering another invitation. Signs of play going wrong are when dogs become over-excited and engage in chasing that seems to be scaring the other dog, no stopping and swapping, an escalation of force and the tail may tuck and ears go flat against the head in one of the players. Some dogs are poor readers of other dog's signals and some breed types can be hard for others to read. Through breeding, humans have hampered dogs' ability to communicate effectively to each other and may have unintentionally bred animals that are more prone to miscommunication.

Owners should be able to interrupt play and should do so often so dogs learn to control themselves and their impulses. Dogs can become over aroused, frightened and then defensive if left to play with dogs unmatched to them.

Good social etiquette requires that owners should not let their unleashed dog approach a dog on a leash.

The dog may be on leash because he does not socialise well. It is not good enough to insist that the off-leash dog is friendly. It may be adding to an already reactive dog's stress levels.

When using dog parks it is best to keep moving. Rather than using it as a social encounter for people, caregivers should be observing and watching their dogs. Use this as a time to connect with your dog. Caregivers should take this opportunity to read the body language of their dog and of other dogs around him so they can be proactive. If they see their dog is being bullied by other dogs, chased without stopping, or becoming scared they need to stop the play and move on. Owners should not let their dog be the bully either. This teaches the dog poor manners, no impulse control and eventually can lead to dog reactivity and aggression.



Not every dog is suitable for off leash dog play and off leash socialisation. If you are unsure you need to talk to us. Some dogs can be assisted and others require management lifelong. If your dog has poor social skills it does not mean he cannot be walked. Different routes need to be found. Semi industrial areas are good choices. Different ways of enriching his world and canine/human play can make up for a dog without canine play partners.

Some of the most suitable play can be between two dogs that know each other well. If you have socialised your dog well from the beginning you may have a few friends with dogs that your dog can spend time with. He does not have to attend busy parks, or doggy day care to fulfil his social needs.

Helpful resources include;

- Off Leash dog play – Robin Bennett
- Play with your dog – Pat Miller

Source: Animal Sense Blog

<https://animalsense.com.au/2017/02/19/understanding-canine-play>

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