

4 Telltale Signs That Something Ugly Is About to Occur Between Dogs

Knowing where dogs draw the line between playing and fighting can tip you off to telltale signs something ugly is in the air. Is it roughhousing or fighting? Know the traits of normal play versus when it's getting dangerous, so you can nip it in the bud before you or a dog gets hurt.

By Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Sometimes it's difficult for dog parents to know whether their pet is playing with another dog, or about to get into a fight
- Normal dog play has no winners or losers — there's a healthy, balanced back-and-forth between the dogs
- Signs of potentially dangerous play include one-sided intensity or aggressiveness, grabbing and shaking and raised hackles
- The best time for your pet to learn appropriate dog-to-dog interaction is while she's still a puppy

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published September 4, 2017.

One of the best ways for dogs to get much-needed exercise and mental stimulation is through play with other dogs. Play inspired interactions can also be very beneficial (I would say critical) in **helping to socialize your pet** and teach him how to behave appropriately with other dogs.

With that said, there are times in every dog parent's life when it can be difficult to determine if Buddy is playing or working up to a full-on brawl with one of his doggy acquaintances.

This can also be the case when an unfamiliar or brand new furry friend starts mixing it up with your dog. "Is he playing or fighting?" you nervously ask the other dog's owner. This scenario is especially concerning when there's a significant size and strength disparity between the dogs.

You certainly don't want your little 10 pounder to be injured by a dog several times his size, and if your dog is the bigger one, you don't want him to inadvertently (or, heaven forbid, intentionally) hurt a smaller playmate. So what's a concerned dog parent to do?

What Normal, Healthy Dog Play Looks Like

Veterinarian and animal behaviorist Dr. Lisa Radosta, writing for veterinary journal dvm360, describes what normal canine play looks like:¹

“Normal play can include chasing, catching, biting, growling and pouncing, which can also occur in more serious interactions. However, if the dogs are engaging in safe, healthy play, these behaviors are less intense and don’t end in injury. For example, a dog may repeatedly pounce high into the air in a nonaggressive manner to get another dog’s attention.

Normal play has no winners or losers, so it often includes equalizers, like role reversals and self-handicapping. Role reversals occur when the winner of the game switches roles. For example, the game may start with one dog as the chaser and end with the other dog doing the chasing.

Self-handicapping describes when dogs play at the level of the weakest participant or put themselves in a position of disadvantage. You may have seen an older, larger dog self-handicap by lying on its back to allow a puppy to climb on it in play.

*Other signals that almost always occur during normal play include the **play bow** — the dog’s front paws are on the ground up to the elbow and its rear is in the air — and the play face, which is an open, soft mouth.”*

Signs of Unhealthy, Potentially Dangerous Play

Radosta recommends that as you observe your pet at play with other dogs, be alert for signs that indicate something other than normal play is happening or about to happen, including:

- You don’t see role reversals and self-handicapping. Remember that normal play doesn’t have winners or losers. For example, your dog’s playmate is doing all the chasing as they run around together, while your pet seems to be constantly running away from the other guy.
- You witness intense and **aggressive play**, including grab and shake components. The grabbing and shaking thing is definitely a red flag, whether your dog is on the giving or receiving end of the behavior.
- You see that at least one of the dogs has her hackles up, which is often a sign of fear or anxiety. Raised hackles is another red flag that something ugly could be about to occur.
- You notice that one dog is disengaging while the other isn’t. This is a scenario in which the disengaging dog can become “prey” in the interaction, which can trigger even more intense behavior on the part of the pursuing dog.

If you see any of the above signs, interrupt the dogs and give them a break. I would also add that if you’re in the presence of the other dog’s owner, especially if that person is someone you don’t know well, and his or her dog is displaying behavior with your pet that makes you uneasy, don’t look to the other person for a cue.

Unfortunately, many guardians of dogs with aggressive tendencies can’t or refuse to see the forest for the trees. They incorrectly assume their dog’s behavior is normal or that your dog just needs to “toughen up.” Trust your gut, especially if your pet is smaller or is showing signs of fear or **submission**.

Below is a short video of two dog housemates roughhousing. Note the constant give-and-take between them. This is a great demonstration of healthy, normal dog play:

5 Tips for Discouraging Aggressive Play in Puppies

The best time for a dog to learn to play well with others is while he's still a puppy. In order to mature into a good canine citizen, your puppy must learn how to play appropriately, and you can help him in the following ways:

1. **Sidetrack bad behavior** — Keep a toy on hand that will grab your pup's attention as soon as he engages in inappropriate behavior. Offer him toys to mouth and chew on before he has a chance to make bad choices.
2. **Give verbal cues followed by an action** — If your puppy is biting too hard during play, loudly say "Ouch," and stop playing immediately.
3. **Give a time-out** — If your pup isn't responding to your attempts to stop a behavior, put him and a few toys in a separate room or his crate until he settles down.
4. **Don't engage in aggressive roughhousing or play** — Some puppies have a low arousal threshold and can become very assertive, quickly. Avoid rigorous or intense play with these puppies, which can escalate into more mouthy play on their part, or nipping behaviors.
5. **Use leashes and head halters** — You can use a leash indoors as well as outside to quickly stop a behavior. Don't yank or jerk the leash — simply use it when necessary to gain control over the situation. Head halters sometimes provide a more natural sense of control than collars do, but it's important to match the collar, harness or halter to the personality and training needs of each puppy.

Sources and References

[dvm360 June 6, 2017](#)

¹ [dvm360, "Is my dog playing ... or fighting?" Client Handout \(Archived\)](#)
