

We as humans expect that all dogs will get along with each other or they will sort things out. Unfortunately it is not that easy. Dogs have different play styles, some of which are incompatible. There are dogs that enjoy play and dogs that would rather not interact with other dogs and still others that are afraid of other dogs or assertive towards dogs. Even when play is going well it can escalate from play into a confrontation.

Not all dogs want to play with other dogs! Not all dogs are going to be friends! Most dogs use their bodies to communicate with each other. It is important for dog owners to understand some basic canine communication. One body posture that indicates things are going well is a "play bow." One dog will crouch with her front legs on the ground and her hind end in the air. This is an invitation to play that usually elicits friendly behavior from the other dog. Watch carefully for body postures that indicate an aggressive response, including baring their teeth, growls, a stiff legged gait or a prolonged stare. If you see such postures from your dog or the other dog, interrupt the interaction immediately by calmly and positively getting each dog interested in something else. For example, both handlers can call their dogs to them, have them sit or lie down and reward each with a treat. The dogs will become interested in the treats which will prevent the situation from escalating into aggression. If the dogs do not disengage from each other, use a shaker can, whistle or air horn so that you can make a loud noise to startle the dogs into looking at you. At this point you can separate the dogs. Never pull back or put tension on leashes of two dogs sniffing or in close contact. This could cause the dogs to react stronger.

Ideally puppies have learned to play appropriately with other puppies and have learned appropriate bite inhibition. Some puppies have been through appropriate socialization and when they are an adolescent lose the ability to play nicely.

If your dog has not had a chance to play with many other dogs it would be important to play with appropriate dogs. You need to have a controlled setting with consenting dogs. An appropriate dog can play well with other dogs. Ideally when you are introducing dogs, it is in a safe dog friendly area with lots of open space. You can have a long leash attached to each dog; if they look comfortable at a distance then you can come closer, without any tension on either leash. If both dogs still look relaxed, leave the leashes attached and drop the leashes. Both dogs would ideally have no body tension. If it looks like the dogs will not get along then, distract them or startle them and then use the long leashes to get them back to you once they are distracted. If they are doing well, you can take the long leashes off. As play continues get your dog to come to you occasionally so that they can calm down. A tired or agitated dog can quickly go from playing nicely to being aggressive.

Reactive Rover classes are offered at the Calgary Humane Society, for dogs aged 6 months and over with known aggression or reactivity issues. In the class owners learn and experience how dogs communicate, examining their relationship with their dog and learn appropriate behaviour and how to reward it. The small class size provides encouragement and a positive learning environment for dogs and handlers. Reactive Rover addresses dog to dog aggression and the techniques can also be used with other fear based aggression issues. Owners can safely practice controlling their dogs in a controlled setting.

For dogs that harm other dogs, common sense and continual precautionary management are the only options. The dog should be kept on leash and muzzled whenever in public. Allowing a dog that harms other puppies and dogs the opportunity to interact with other dogs would be unfair, irresponsible, and potentially dangerous.

Owners Responsibility: Preventing problems between dogs is the responsibility of realistic and responsible owners. Dogs need to play by the rules and owners need to teach them the rules by having a good relationship and clearly communicating expectations. Owners need to be realistic about the tolerance level of their dog; essentially you need to know what behaviours your dog can tolerate from other dogs and what play styles or behaviour are unacceptable to your dog.

Dogs can be:

Social Dogs – Enjoy playing and are great with most dogs

Tolerant Dogs – Laid back easy going dog that has a long fuse

Dog Selective – Has a very specific style of play that is tolerated (chase, wrestling, etc.)

Dog Aggressive – A short fuse with most or all dogs

Dogs Change: Be realistic about your dog's tolerance level. Tolerance levels can easily change with age and circumstances. Typically as a dog gets older they become more selective in the dogs that they will happily and appropriately interact with.

Leashes: Many dogs are great when they are off leash and will react to a dog if they meet on leash.

Triggers: Watch your dog and learn about any triggers that lead to inappropriate behaviour. Some triggers are toys, rough play, food, a leash, eye contact or a small animal running away. When you see the triggers redirect your dog to an appropriate activity.

Fences or barriers: Dogs should not be allowed to bark, growl, lunge or chase other dogs on the other side of a fence. Behaviours that are well practiced become a part of their repertoire and difficult to change.

Consequences: Ensure that if your dog is being inappropriate with other dogs that play stops and both of you leave the situation. However, remember to praise your dog when they have a relaxed body and have good manners around other dogs and people. Set up dog up for success and make good decisions about play partners. Owners need to be proactive and realistic so that problems between dogs can be avoided.

Appropriate Play: For appropriate play to occur owners need to watch their dogs and watch for any gestures that are concerning or a high risk of conflict. Any play that is allowed to continue for a prolonged period can turn to be inappropriate play. Owners need to continually supervise play, have breaks and ensure that play is appropriate for all dogs involved.

Positive Social Gestures for Play: Play Bow, Lateral Movements, Exaggerated Repetitive Movements, Low and Slow Tail Wagging, Cat Like Play and Balanced Play.

Gestures that are a Concern for Conflict and Miscommunication: Chase, Pinning a Dog with Quick Releases, Body Slamming, Excessive Barking, Increase in Arousal, Rough Play, Mounting, Stalking, Head and Chin Over Shoulders.

Gestures that are a High Risk of Conflict: Pinning a Dog with No Release, High Arousal, Bullying, Play that Hurts or Scares, Stalking that Scares a Dog.

An excellent book on appropriate dog play is called "Off-Leash Dog Play: A Complete Guide to Safety & Fun" by Robin Bennett and Susan Briggs. This book is available at the Calgary Humane Society Store.