



*K-9 Partnership*



# Doggy Play Styles

Ever watch a dog group play together? You might see some different play styles being demonstrated without knowing what you are seeing. Play behavior is sometimes difficult for people to discern from aggressive behavior. Based on your dog's genetics, experiences and exposures especially during puppyhood are the usual basis of components for your doggy's play style.

Setting the myth of "dominance hierarchies" aside and only watching what the dog is doing can give you some new insight into your dog's style. (Rather than labeling our interpretations – observe what they are doing and how the recipient receives the behavior)

Play-styles:

- | Tarzan
- | Bully
- | Police
- | Asocial
- | Proximity Sensitive
- | Resource Guarder
- | Compulsive Fighter
- | A-1 Player
- | Play Skill Deficit

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**Tarzan** describes a dog that lacks sophistication during play. The dog tends to be rude and obnoxious towards fellow play mates. He is overly excited to meet and greet other dogs. This play-style behavior is common in undersocialized dogs that missed the learning experiences during the sensitive period during puppyhood. Imagine if Tarzan was invited to a party and how he would act. Tarzan dogs have some skill in good dog play body behavior it's just that it is very coarse and over the top which most other sophisticated dogs find annoying and not pleasant to be around. It's analogous to someone trying to communicate to others using crayons and large sloppy handwriting kind of like what a novice or inexperienced person would do. They haven't learnt or refined they body language skills.

**Bully** describes a dog that has refined dog play skills with some but has the persistent behavior of selecting a dog and picking on it non-stop. This play-style is usually non-consenting on the part of the other dog. This play-style can easily tip over into aggression due to the fact that the non-consenting dog is trying to avoid the bully and the only way to communicate "get away from me" is an intensive outburst of aggression display or worse – aggressive behavior with intent to damage.

**Police** describes a dog that usually breaks up outbursts of rough play behavior between two other dogs. When two other dogs start playing together, the police dog usually follows and circles the pair ready for action. When the pair gets overly active or rough the police dog usually rushes in and splits up the play between the two dogs. This can also cause some aggressive displays especially if one of the two dogs doesn't appreciate the help. The police dog usually doesn't display a well rounded play behavior sequence and tends to be more asocial in group situations.

**Asocial** describes a dog that does not interact with other groups of dogs or another dog – period. They would much prefer hanging out on the outskirts of a dog play group and either isolate itself with the owners or find a "safe" corner or area to get away from the other dogs. They usually hide under or behind things. I would strongly suggest not pushing the dog to meet & greet other dogs or to "force" the dog to play with others. The behavior is also a component of undersocialization.

**Proximity Sensitive** describes a dog that has issues with other dogs coming within a certain distance from it. They are conflicted in their behavior – they demonstrate the willingness to interact and play with others but as soon as another dog approaches – it will give threat displays to stay away. It may only have 1 or 2 good play friends and may be overly stressed in a group of dogs. Aggression displays or aggressive actions are highly likely.



**Resource Guarder** describes a dog that might have a sophisticated communication system and does well with other dogs but might display aggressive tendencies when “valued” things or persons are in the same environment. They can resource guard all the toys, a certain toy, the water dishes, the person, etc. If you go to a dog park I would highly caution you to first observe the other dogs before letting this type of dog into the mix. Be aware of your environment – MANAGE it to limit this resource guarding behavior. Again – this can lead to aggressive displays.

**Compulsive Fighter** describes a dog that is genetically predisposed to display predatory behavior only towards other animals of any species. They totally lack the genetic strand that encodes “play-behavior”. They will not learn proper play behavior – they will rush immediately to another dog or animal with the intent to kill. Besides rushing in, they often will try to debilitate the other animal either with a neck break or leg injury. Leg injuries are a death sentence to the victim – the bones are easily crushed and there is a major artery in the leg that is often severed.

**A-1 Player** describes a dog that has been properly socialized to the world and to other dogs. They display perfect play body language such as play bows, demeanor shifting, soft body and bouncy movement during play.

**Play Skill Deficit** describes a dog that lacks any understanding of proper play behavior. They want to interact with another dog but are either conflicted between predatory behaviors and play behaviors or they get locked into one behavior style. Very coarse and rough and can easily tip over to aggression. Rushing in, T-Mounts, and sexual mounting are samples of this form of play style. It is very persistent and constant.

Other components that play a factor in how your dog interacts and plays with other dogs are sex and age. Older dogs especially females over the age of 3 have very low tolerance for young hyper rude and obnoxious pups and/or adolescents. Adult male dogs usually target the younger adolescent dogs and go thru a “hazing” process. Scientists are researching why this occurs and one has come up with a hypothesis based on research findings that young adolescent males tend to spike in testosterone levels at this stage in life and the “hazing” affect from the older male dogs teaches the younger male appropriate group behavior. So young adolescent males “carry” an invisible bulls eye on their sides advertising their maturity status to adult male dogs.

Recommended Reading:  
The Culture Clash by Jean Donaldson  
Dominance Theory and Dogs by James O'Heare

Good play should involve:

- demeanor shifting
- play-bows
- bouncy movement
- self-interruption



Are these two dogs playing or is it an aggression display?

Purchase:

**Fight! A guide to dog-dog aggression** by Jean Donaldson (not yet published 2004).

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