



Decoding Dog Play

Many dogs enjoy the company of other dogs, and love to romp and play with their canine companions. However, just like kids on the playground, play styles don't always match up, accidents happen, and sticky situations can occur. Here's an overview of how to keep an eye out for common canine play stumbling blocks, and how to set your dogs up for success.

Not all dogs want to play with (all) other dogs!

And that's ok! We assume most dogs are social because social dogs are the ones that are the most VISIBLE. But while a small percentage of dogs are friendly with all the dogs they meet, *the vast majority are what is known as "dog selective."* They may be comfortable only with a certain type of play, or with certain well-known dogs. Outside those parameters they may be avoidant, or even reactive. And that is normal! *It's our job to set them up for interactions where we know they can be comfortable and successful in.*

Body language cues

Play is a large and complex topic, with TONS of body language that depends on context. But here are a few general guidelines that can help you navigate play interactions:

Green Flags	Yellow Flags	Red Flags
Loose, curved, bouncy bodies	Tension in body postures	One dog cornered/chased
Play bows, back and forth	Lip licks/whale eye (whites of eyes)	Stiff body/full hackles/hard stare
Frequent BREAKS in play	Piloerection (hackles up)	Escalations in vocalization
Role reversal, taking turns	Not choosing to reengage with dogs	Growling/snapping/snarling
Any mouthing is inhibited (gentle)	Lack of role reversals	Pinning down other dog
Both dogs will reengage	Biting and holding equipment or skin	Avoiding all dog interactions
Choosing to be near each other	Chin over shoulders/high tail	Can't disengage from tense moment

So, what do you do with this information? First, think about how you can set your dog up for success:

- **Consider history.** What do you know of your dog's play styles, and where have they been successful in the past? Are there times when they HAVEN'T been successful? Think about how you can mimic successful conditions, and intentionally exclude scenarios you think they won't be able to handle or won't enjoy. A busy dog park can be overwhelming for many dogs, whereas going for a hike with one or two socially appropriate dogs can be a great way for a dog to start making friends.

For more information or to request behavior assistance, visit eastbayspca.org/behavior.

© 2024. This work is openly licensed via [CC BY-NC 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

- **Consider a longline!** Clipping a 12-20ft longline to a back clip harness can be a great management tool during play. Drag lines allow you to intervene easily even if your dog doesn't have a reliable recall. Easy to clean Biothane lines are a great choice. Local company [High Tail Hikes](#) makes special lines without end-loops so that they won't get caught during play (and a bunch of free resources that teach you how to use them!).
 - *Pro tip:* High Tail Hikes offers a 10% discount to East Bay SPCA adopters and clients! Use promo code **EBSPCA10** at check out.
- **Strategic greetings.** Give dogs a chance to acclimate to the presence of another dog before rushing in to say hello. This can mean taking a little walk together before transitioning to play or being thoughtful about which dog may need more time and space. A timid dog may do better being able to approach a more confident dog from behind to get a sniff in without pressure to engage in play right away. In a multi-dog play situation, it's a good idea to call your dog away as a new dog enters to avoid them being crowded by too many new dogs at once. For dogs that live together, it can be helpful to set up introductions to each member of the household individually before allowing everyone to play as a group. See our ***Dog-to-Dog Introduction* [handout](#)** for tips!



- **Bring high value treats.** We mean hot dogs, chicken, cheese, and lunch meat. These high value snacks may come in handy to build good associations with seeing dogs from a distance or paying your dog for leaving play and taking a break!
- **Create breaks.** *Healthy dog play involves lots of “breaks”*—moments when the dogs will stop play, even if only for a few seconds before reengaging. *If these breaks are NOT occurring, create them!* Call the dogs apart, reward them with a tasty treat, then send them back. This can serve to give more tired dogs a break, encourage them to drink water, and bring down heart rate if play was getting a bit intense.

Preemptive Skill Building

Want to practice some skills prior to your pup's playtime? Here are some exercises that can be great to have in your toolbox during play:

- **Be present.** Just like with toddlers on the playground, dog play needs proactive supervision! Reading body language is a skill like any other, and we can practice any time our dogs play. See if you can identify patterns in the play, and if those patterns give you clues about your dog's level of enjoyment.

For more information or to request behavior assistance, visit eastbayspca.org/behavior.

© 2024. This work is openly licensed via [CC BY-NC 4.0](#).

- **Foraging/find-its.** Sniffing is a calming activity! Studies have shown there is a proportionate decrease in a dog's heart rate to time spent sniffing. Dropping treats onto the ground or onto a surface like grass where the dog must sniff to find them is an easy way to lower excitement levels during breaks. Just make sure that the area is clear of other dogs who might resource guard dropped treats!
- **Recall.** This behavior can feel insurmountable, but it's all about *practice, context, and treat value*. BEFORE trying it during play:
 - Choose something your dog finds DELICIOUS but doesn't get regularly. *Habitually* pair that high value reinforcer with a specific cue (ex. "HERE!"). Make sure to pay up EVERY TIME! Coming in from the yard? "HERE!" = high value reward. Getting into the car? "HERE!" = high value reward. Every time they hear that sound, it means the GOOD STUFF is coming.
 - Build a history of them whipping around at the sound of that cue *BEFORE trying it out during play*. Until it's ready, use another technique, such as a longline.
 - When you're ready to practice during playtime, *make sure that you plan to use your recall most often when you can immediately send the dog BACK TO PLAY*. This will avoid poisoning your cue (i.e., the dog learning that every time they get recalled, the fun stops and they go home).
- **Touch targeting.** This can be a great tool to help keep your dog's engagement or move them where you want them during exciting moments. Check out our *Touch Targeting handout* to learn the process!
- **Positive interrupters.** If you need your dog's attention during a tense moment, coming in and yelling or grabbing can intensify the stress that is leading to the tension in the dogs. Instead, try something like a squeaker. Most dogs are used to refocusing when they hear a squeaky toy, and it can buy you the moment you need to interrupt a behavior without accidentally escalating the situation.
- **When in doubt, take a break.** Trust your instincts! If your dog looks uncomfortable, or if you think your dog is causing OTHER dogs to feel uncomfortable, *intervene, take a break, or end the play session altogether*. Just letting the dogs "work it out" can lead to elevated stress levels, fallout such as reactivity in other contexts, and even fights. Burning energy is not worth a scuffle or a fight that can ensue when play tips into aggression. There are SO many other ways to meet your dog's needs outside of dog/dog play if it just didn't feel right that day!