

“Is my dog playing ... or fighting?”



How to tell the difference between normal play and inappropriate aggression in dogs.

Safe, healthy play doesn't just provide dogs with a good source of exercise. It can also aid in social development while building behavioral flexibility and helping the dog learn to get along with others. But rough or traumatic interactions with inappropriate playmates can cause emotional and physical problems. And in some cases, it can lead to aggression. Here's how to tell the difference.

Normal play

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.

While it's better to be concerned than to tune out, if the above signals are present in both dogs, there is little cause for worry—even if the play looks aggressive or if one dog is much smaller than the other. For example, a Yorkie can play with a boxer if the boxer understands how to self-handicap.

Another telltale sign that play is normal is the willingness of each dog to continue. If one dog is walking away and the other is relentlessly pursuing it, there is reason to be concerned. When one dog disengages, the other dog should as well—even if for a short time.

Causes for concern

- You don't see role reversals and self-handicapping. Remember that normal play doesn't have winners or losers.
- You witness intense and aggressive play, including grab and shake components.
- You see that at least one of the dogs has its hackles up, which is often a sign of fear or anxiety.
- You notice that one dog is disengaging while the other isn't.

If you see any of the above signs, interrupt the dogs to give them a break.

Your veterinarian can help!

If you're concerned about your dog's play behavior, let your veterinarian know. He or she can refer you to a behavior professional, like a board-certified veterinary behaviorist or a qualified dog trainer, depending on the problem that needs to be addressed.