

Both Ends of the Leash

The Pause that Refreshes

Play or warming up for a fight-
how to tell the difference

Patricia B. McConnell

For a moment, I was speechless. There I was, standing in a green and leafy back yard beside two lovely people whose dogs were fighting. At least, that's what the young couple thought when they called me and set up the appointment. Now I'd come to their home to see for myself, and we stood together and watched their Golden Retrievers growl and bark and flash their huge, white teeth for all the world to see.

And yet (you know what I'm going to say here, don't you?), in spite of the noise and the fangs and the wrestling, the dogs weren't fighting. They were playing – joyfully and politely. As I watched, I tried to figure out how to say to their guardians, “Your dogs aren't fighting, they're playing. That will be a hundred dollars.”

This happened a long time ago, and I did tell them that their dogs weren't fighting, but I didn't charge them anything – I just didn't have the heart, and I sympathized with their inability to distinguish between the two behaviors. Many of the actions seen during play are close replicates of those seen during real fights, and even scientists who study behavior are hard-pressed to write definitions that uniquely define “play.” However, there are observable behaviors that distinguish healthy play from impending trouble – otherwise I wouldn't have been so sure that the Golden Retrievers were playing instead of fighting. The question to ask is not “Is all this growling and biting bothering me?” but “Is it bothering one of the dogs?”

First things first: What is play anyway? Ah, answers are not easy to come by, given that so much of play replicates fighting, predation and reproduction. Scientist Marc Bekoff did as good a job as any when



he defined play as “all motor activity that appears purposeless, with motor patterns from other contexts modified and altered...” The modifications he mentions are predictable – actions seen in play are often exaggerated (think of young puppies' leaps and pounces), tend to stop and start rather than continue (shaking a toy as though killing it does not lead to consuming it – unless, of course, you spent a fortune on that new stuffed toy), are often directed laterally rather than forward and, most importantly, exhibit a tremendous amount of “self-handicapping.”

Self-handicapping, which is perhaps the most critical aspect of healthy play, occurs when the stronger or faster play partner tempers her abilities and doesn't use her strength against the other. That's why you see so many large dogs lying on the ground while a smaller, weaker dog stays up on all fours. Self-handicapping is especially important in predatory species: Imagine what would happen if the mock biting that dogs engage in wasn't tempered by bite inhibition. Self-handicapping is obvious in our own species as well – unless you include professional football, which occasionally tips out of the play category and into something more akin to battles between gladiators. But mostly, we humans play by the rules; we learn as children, as do dogs as puppies, that we need to inhibit ourselves to keep the game going.

The next time you watch dogs play, pay attention to all the times that each dog self-handicaps. How many “bites” are delivered with a soft mouth? How many times does the bigger or stronger dog lie down and let the smaller one leap all over him? Once you start paying attention to the clues, it will be much

easier to tell when the self-handicapping breaks down. Was that last “play bite” a bit too hard and too long in duration? Did the bigger dog's body slam the smaller one in such a way that it might have caused discomfort or injury? The fastest way to detect a lack of self-handicapping is to observe both dogs (“normal canine play” is usually between a pair of dogs, not three or four – doggie day cares take note) and notice whether the two continue to willingly engage with one another, or if one is trying to get away, hide behind a tree or in some way extract herself from the “game.”

The ability to self-handicap requires a certain amount of emotional maturity. After all, part of what makes play fun is its combination of excitement and a tendency to abandon the rules of normal life. The excitement and freedom we feel during play can lead to an increased state of emotional arousal, and therein lies the danger. Remember the phrase “I went to a fight and a hockey game broke out”? Things get wild at sports events, both on and off the field, because both players and spectators can get carried away and lose the ability to inhibit themselves.

This is equally true of dogs. Many a good dog has ended up in a fight because she became overly aroused while playing with another dog. That's why canine professionals monitor play between dogs and watch for signs of over-arousal: Are the dogs' vocalizations changing – becoming more rapid, higher or lower? Are their actions becoming more intense, jerkier, with less self-handicapping? If so, then it's an appropriate moment to say “Let's go for a walk!” and give the dogs a time-out.

Dogs who “play well with others” consciously or unconsciously know how to control their own emotional arousal. Watch two dogs playing together, especially two dogs who don't know each other well. You'll see (one hopes) lots of “play bows” that famously stereotyped signal from one dog to another that means “Everything I'm about to do is just a joke!” Play bows are called “meta-communication” by scientists, meaning that they are communications about communication. However, play bows do more than clarify the actions to come – they also act as time-outs. Watch dogs begin a play session and you'll often see lots of play bows interspersed with bouts of high-energy wrestling or chasing. If you watch and record the presence or absence of

movement, your notes will look something like Move, Stop, Move, Stop, Move, Stop, with the intervals between pauses lasting only a few seconds as the dogs get to know each other, and then becoming longer as they become more comfortable.

Dogs pause in other ways, often stopping all movement and facing each other for a second or two until one ducks her head and leaps to one side, initiating yet another bout of chase or wrestle play. These pauses are critical to managing levels of emotional arousal, and I believe that the lack of them is often what gets people into trouble when they are playing with their own dogs. As adults, most of us are pretty good at managing our levels of emotional arousal, and so we don't think to stop and pause while we'e playing with our dogs. But we can't expect animals with far less ability to temper emotion with rational thought to be as good as it as we are. Children also have problems controlling their emotions, inadvertently ramping up their own and their dog's arousal levels to the boiling (or biting) point.

We need to use our understanding of how dogs play to inform the way we play with them, and that includes teaching ourselves to incorporate pauses. Doing that could avoid a tremendous amount of pain and suffering – any trainer or behaviorist could talk for hours about the sad cases they've seen in which an overly aroused dog bit someone during play. My wish is that all beginning family dog-training classes would incorporate a section on How to Play with Your Dog. Isn't that more important than teaching our dogs to sit straight or walk perfectly on heel?

As I write, old Lassie and young Willie are playing in the living room. When Will was a young pup, Lassie taught him to play tug. When Will had a toy in his mouth, Lassie would carefully take hold of the other end and pull just hard enough to keep Will interested. She inhibited her strength and power, and the few times that she pulled the toy out of Will's mouth, she immediately moved it back to him and then pulled again with less force once he took hold. That was when Willie weighed 10 pounds and she was a strong 12-year-old. Now Will is three, and Lassie is a deaf, partially blind 15-year-old. She hasn't lost her love of play but is weak in the hindquarters and a little slow out of the gate. They still play tug, my young male in his prime and my old girl in her dotage, but

now it is Will who self-handicaps, rarely shaking his head as he does when he and I play tug together (with such strength that I can't always hold on), pulling straight back just hard enough to keep the game going. All Will is doing is playing by the rules (rules we would all be well-advised to keep in mind when evaluating canine play in any form) but it still makes me feel all warm and gooey to think about the tables turning, and how play binds us – human and dog, young and old – in one of the world's most remarkable relationships.

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