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Play Together, Stay Together

Happy and Healthy Play
Between People and Dogs

PMC

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INTRODUCTION

Play is powerful stuff. It influences so many things, including development, motivation, emotions, physiology, communication, and behavior. Wow! That's an impressive list. That's why we believe that play between people and dogs deserves a booklet of its own.

The thoughtful use of play can do much to improve the lives of both people and dogs. Most importantly, play is an effective (and delightful!) way to strengthen our relationships with dogs. Given that people and dogs are members of two different species, what could be more important? We are all used to the idea of being best friends with our dogs, but that relationship shouldn't be taken for granted. Sometimes we forget how special it is. People are amazed to read about individuals of other species who live and play together—a gorilla with a pet kitten, or a dog who raises squirrels, for example—but the fact that we live with dogs isn't considered newsworthy. However, there's no denying that our relationship with dogs is a bit of a miracle, given how closely connected our lives have become.

Our unique relationship with dogs is, in part, a result of our mutual love of play. It is unusual for most animals to play with any regularity when they are adults. There are, of course, exceptions, such as river otters and wolves, but they come to mind partly because we so rarely see mature animals playing. How many grown-up cows have you seen frolicking together around a pasture? People and dogs are exceptions, perhaps because we are what biologists call *neotenous*, meaning that we retain many of our juvenile traits into adulthood.¹ One of those juvenile traits is playfulness, and dogs and people have it in spades—you and your dog are basically modern day Peter Pans. Thus, play is part of our biological bond, and for many of us, part of our day-to-day link with dogs.

¹ There is some controversy in the scientific community about whether or not dogs are truly neotenous, or whether their juvenile attributes reflect some other phenomena, but that debate is far beyond the scope of this book!

INTRODUCTION

At its simplest, play is fun, and there's nothing like having fun with someone to make you want to spend more time together.

Perhaps this is a good time to ask “what is play, anyway?” Webster's dictionary defines play as “*to occupy oneself in amusement, sport or other recreation: (i.e.) children playing with toys.*” That is a broad definition, encompassing a variety of activities, from playing poker to pole-vaulting to making goofy faces in the mirror. We encourage you to define play broadly too. There are many ways to amuse yourself and your dog; what matters is that the two of you are engaged in an activity that you both enjoy, and that gives you a sense of freedom and lightheartedness. Fetch and chase games are wonderful ways to keep your dog's body well-exercised, and learning new tricks exercises his mind. A balance of mental and physical exercise makes for happy, well-behaved dogs; that's why this booklet includes ways to encourage your dog to use his brain. Games are also great educational tools, and can be used to teach manners to the most exuberant of dogs. Sometimes the best learning happens when it doesn't feel like a “lesson.”

You'd think our mutual love of play would mean that we all know how to play together naturally, but people and dogs often miscommunicate while trying to play. What we think of as play signals might be perceived as corrections by some dogs. Or you might be trying to teach your dog one game while he's trying to teach you another—look at how good dogs are at getting us to chase them rather than bringing back the ball! Sometimes, dogs learn things during play sessions that cause problems in other contexts, like nipping the neighbor's child or body-slammng Aunt Nellie. As applied animal behaviorists, we've often seen that happen to nice people with nice dogs who ended up in trouble in spite of themselves. That's not surprising; anything with the power to do good usually comes with the power to do harm. There's no reason that play should be an exception.

Part of what makes play fun is that it can be exciting, but excitement can lead to a lack of emotional control, which, in turn can lead to aggression.