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Dog Training & Behavior Services

## Canine Play: Appropriate vs. Inappropriate Play

That's just how he plays" is a phrase that can be often heard at dog parks. Just because "that's how he plays" that doesn't mean it's appropriate play or that your dog is supposed to like it or deal with it! I had a personal experience with this at my local dog park. I was just walking along with my dogs and my dad's Rottweiler mix, Mya. Very quickly and assertively a cattle dog mix came running up full speed and tackled Mya, biting her neck and making a lot of noise. Mya very submissively rolled and squealed. I said "Hey!" clapped my hands loudly and shooed the dog off saying "Get out of here!". From half way across the park a woman yells rudely "She's just playing!" I chose to walk away rather than have an unpleasant conversation. That dog may have indeed been "just playing" (the dog did not intend harm) but it was extremely inappropriate and very scary for my dog, even though she is quite good with other dogs.

### So this prompts the question, how do you know what is appropriate vs. inappropriate play?

Let's start off with what the initial greeting should look like. Dog's should approach each other very loosely and indirectly (well socialized dogs will do a slight arc, never approaching directly nose to nose), without staring or direct eye contact. The greeting ideally should start with butt sniffing and can include nose sniffing as well. During this process you should not see any freezing (dog stops moving completely), the bodies should remain fairly loose, circling, play bowing, etc. Dog's with poor social skills may not greet like this, and that doesn't necessarily mean they will be aggressive, but it does mean to proceed with caution. If I see my dogs approach a dog with poor social skills, I will quickly say, "Ok, lets go" and move away with my dogs. Not

only does it keep my dog's safe, but it helps that dog have more good experiences.

**Different dogs have very different play styles.** Some are very rowdy with a lot of body slamming and mouthing, while others prefer low to no contact play. Some are very vocal, growling and barking (which is ok as long as the other dog is comfortable with it), others very quiet. This can make it difficult to tell whether or not the play is appropriate. **The best way to tell is BOTH dogs continue to be willing participants.** If you separate them, they will both come back to play once released. If only one is returning to play, the other is likely done and the dogs should be separated to avoid the dog that is done from becoming frustrated and snapping at the other dog to tell him to "knock it off!"

Contrary to popular belief, growling, snarling and air snapping can actually be a good thing if the dog uses it appropriately. A well socialized dog will offer these behaviors as warnings, communicating that they do not like what is going on (a dog playing too rough for instance). A dog that skips these behaviors is much more dangerous, and for this reason you never want to punish these behaviors, simply remove your dog from the situation. If you punish the growl, your dog will skip it entirely and when frustrated go straight for an attack.

**Good playmates can vary in size, age and breed, but their styles of play should be similar.** Good play typically involves chasing, parallel running, rolling around, play bowing, throwing paws around, and brief pounces at one another. You will also see dogs using their mouths to "bite" one another, but these are play bites and the dogs are using a soft mouth to be sure the other dog is not hurt. If a lot of the mouthing is directed at the dog's neck, proceed with



caution. A little mouthing here and there is okay, but it should not be the dogs primary focus.

Another great thing to watch for is the dogs taking brief pauses in their play. They both stop for just a moment, then resume play. This is a dogs way of checking in to make sure everything is still going well and to calm the situation. Good playmates will do this often.

To see this information in action and watch some videos, visit my blog at [www.luckypawsmn.wordpress.com](http://www.luckypawsmn.wordpress.com) and search "play."

### Additional Resources:

- Language of Dogs (DVD)
  - Sarah Kalnajs
- Calming Signals (DVD)
  - Turid Rugaas
- Body Language of Canine Play
  - Terry Ryan
- Dog Play (Book)
  - Patricia McConnell
- Canine Body Language (Book)
  - Brenda Aloff

These books and DVD's can be found on either Amazon.com or Dogwise.com

[www.LuckyPawsMN.com](http://www.LuckyPawsMN.com)