

Dog To Dog Interaction Guidelines

Below you will find information that may be helpful in recognizing positive and not so positive interactions for your dog. Dogs are social beings by nature and most (not all) crave some form of interaction with their own species. What those desired interactions look like differs from dog to dog. Below I have charted out some body language, gestures and play behaviours that help guide you to understand your dog and their interactions a bit better.

The charts have been broken up into Green, Yellow and Red behaviors for ease of categorizing. Below is the categorization chart :

Management signal	Meaning
Green	Positive body signals/off leash play. Allow interactions to continue
Yellow	Concern for miscommunication or conflict in off leash play. Body language signals stress, fear, over arousal or other discomfort. Close supervision mandatory. Interruption and redirection may be required. During initial meeting adjust environment when many yellow signals are present slow down interaction to see if signals decrease to green or increase to red.
Red	High risk in off leash play. Intervene immediately to stop action. Risk of conflicts due to over arousal, high stress levels or fear. Aggression is highly likely should interaction continue. In initial meetings do not continue with meet.

When doing an initial meet, I recommend safely fenced neutral territory, or at least outside in a fenced backyard. I discourage meetings to take place in the home of one of the dogs. Start on leash at a distance of 20 feet or so and observe the dogs body language. If you like what you see, have the dogs circle on leash and as they get closer drop leashes to allow for freedom of communication

Management signal	Body language
Green	Posture and movement is neutral and relaxed, loose and curvy. Ears are neutral to back, tail is level to low with relaxed wag, eyes are soft and face is relaxed, possibly blinking, relaxed sniffing, for brief moments, mouth slightly open or softly closed, relaxed panting, eye contact is neutral with the dog glancing away at times, dog responds to well known cue immediately
Yellow	Body is stiff, possible hackles, posture is tall with puffed chest, posture is low with hump in back, ears are full forward or flattened to head, tail is high flagged and wagging rapidly/stiffly or tucked, eyes are wide pupils are dilated, staring, , hackles, barking, closed mouth, stress panting, absence of calming signals, excessive calming signals, moving away from fence, avoiding, urinating, dog hesitates or struggles to respond to well know cue
Red	Freezing, trembling, posture is tall, forward and aligned, holding breath, fixated, hard eye, whale eye, facial tension, pursed lips, tight pulled back lips, tight closed mouth, high flagged tail with “rattle snake” type wag, growl, lip lift, lunging, inability to eat food when dog was actively taking food before meeting, inability to respond to well known cues, inability to be redirected or check in with handler

Play styles

There are many different types of dog to dog play. Not all play styles are a good match and not all dogs enjoy all play styles. Below you will find a brief description of some of the most common styles of play between dogs.

Body slammers

The demolition derby dogs of the play ground. They love to run full tilt at others and slam into them sometimes completely knocking them off their feet. Body slammers play best with other body slammers and occasionally some wrestlers and chasers. This is a high risk play style due to its physical nature and potential for injury. These dogs do not play well with soft touch dogs or fun police

Wrestlers

Think full prolonged body contact. These dogs like to take turns pinning and being pinned as well as Lon games of “chewy-face”. This is a fairly benign play style compared to the body slammers as long as both dogs enjoy it. Watch wrestlers for stiffness in play as some times over arousal or too much one sided play can cause some uneasiness and needs intervention

Chasers

These are the dogs who love to run and play “catch me if you can”. Some dogs have a preference for either the role of chaser or chasee. This is a game that can go sideways if too many dogs get involved. Watch the dog being chased for signs of discomfort and the chaser for over arousal. An elongated stride, low and ground covering, combined with fixation and an aligned body could indicate things have gone from play to predation and needs to be interrupted.

Cheerleaders

These are the dogs who remain on the fringes of play and yell about it. They tend to be herding breeds that are prone to incessant barking. Cheer leaders have been known to nip at heels of other dogs and “fun police” the group. This is often not tolerated well by other dogs and cheerleaders should be paired with very tolerant dogs or quiet players who remain calm.

Soft Touches

These dogs are not into much play at all. They may be uncomfortable around other dogs, lack social skills, or have some injury or limitations due to age or physical ability. These dogs play best with other soft touches and other play styles can be too mentally or physically traumatic for them.

Self play/human play

These dogs may prefer the company of humans or just to amuse themselves. They may be dog reactive/aggressive and unable to play with other dogs. Often these dogs will enjoy toys either by themselves, repeatedly pouncing or tossing balls or ropes, or with play with you in a rousing game of fetch or tug. Sometimes, physical or age limitations prevent them from enjoying much play and a soft bed and some snuggles might be more up their alley.

Non Play or Questionable Play Behaviours

Bullying

When one dog is picking on another. The victim displays fearful or uncomfortable body language that is ignored by the bully. The victim may get snappy or aggressive in self defence. Bullying needs to be redirected immediately and not allowed to continue. Switching playmates can sometimes be successful, but often the bully will attempt again with the new dog(s)

Excessive Barking

Often found in cheerleaders or over aroused dogs, excessive barking is annoying to humans and other dogs alike. If allowed to continue the behaviour can be self reinforcing or reinforced by another dog who gives into the barker's demands for play. In either of these instances, barking is being reinforced and thus will continue and increase in duration and frequency. Barkers should be redirected or removed from the group to settle down for a few minutes before attempting to engage again. Sometimes swapping playmates can be helpful.

Over Arousal

Arousal levels in dogs and aggression are closely linked. Signs of an over aroused dog which differ from an excited friendly dog are usually dilated pupils, excessive panting, pacing, excessive barking or jumping, frantic movements, stiff body, whale eye or large buggy eyeballs. Watch these dogs closely, positively interrupt play frequently as prolonged play can increase arousal, attempt some skills practice with the dog such as sitting or attention

Pinning

This can be part of a wrestle or body slam play style but it should not involve one dog stiffening or freezing over and staring at the dog on the bottom for any duration of time. This often makes the bottom dog uncomfortable and can result in a fight when the dog attempts to get up. When watching one dog pin another it should last for brief moments only to prevent the bottom dog from stiffening or getting concerned. The top dog should hop off and back off for long enough that the bottom dog relaxes and engages should the bottom dog have shown signs of discomfort. Any pinning that is not mutual should be interrupted and redirected immediately.

Stalking

Sometimes this can be a form of play, but often if left to go on for too long can become predatory or a form of bullying. If the dog being stalked appears uncomfortable or tries to hide, the behaviour should be interrupted

Pinning or putting head and chin over another dog's shoulders

This is a confrontational, assertive behaviour that should be monitored. If occurring on intro and accompanied by any of the following; a stiff body or freezing, hard eye, tight mouth and lack of calming signals or other play gestures the interaction should be halted. If the behaviour occurs during play, monitor both dogs for signs of tension or an increase in force or arousal. Play may need to be interrupted and redirected.

Intimidation to the point of submission/self defense

If for any reason a dog continues to push themselves on another dog that is showing signs of avoidance or discomfort that dog should be interrupted and redirected. If one dog yelps, the other dog should stop and step back right away, if not, that dog needs a time out to calm down. If one dog is getting snappy as the other dog continues to push or chase, the offending dog should be interrupted and redirected immediately. Play should be mutual and respectful with both dogs responding to each other. If play is becoming one-sided, it should be interrupted. If the pushy dog can not be redirected, time out to settle is required.

Understand your dogs personality type

We as humans expect that all dogs will get along with each other or they will sort things out. Unfortunately it is not that easy. Dogs have different play styles, some of which are incompatible. There are dogs that enjoy play and dogs that would rather not interact with other dogs and still others that are afraid of other dogs or assertive towards dogs. Even when play is going well it can escalate from play into a confrontation. Not all dogs want to play with other dogs! Not all dogs are going to be friends!

If you are interested in play an excellent book on appropriate dog play is called “Off-Leash Dog Play: A Complete Guide to Safety & Fun” by Robin Bennett and Susan Briggs.

Take a look at some different dog personality types.

Social Dogs – Enjoy playing and are great with most dogs

Tolerant Dogs – Laid back easy going dog that has a long fuse

Dog Selective – Has a very specific style of play that is tolerated (chase, wrestling, etc.)

Dog Aggressive – A short fuse with most or all dogs

Notice these descriptions talk specifically about dog to dog interactions. Dogs can be very dog social but dislike humans and vice versa. I like to describe these different personalities as; “**The Nightclubber**”-loves to be out having a blast in a crowd

“**The Pub goer**”-likes to hang out in a more relaxing, social atmosphere

“**Coffee Shop Dog**”-likes a few close friends and quiet, predictable settings

“**The Hermit**”-Doesn’t want to be around other dogs, doesn’t like other dogs

Social Gestures and Body Language During Play

The below chart indicates some different play behaviours and social gestures. These behaviours are fluid and can roll in and out of different colour categories. I recommend constant monitoring of play, especially with dogs who have little to no play history with each other

Management Signal	Expression
Green	Rolling around, gentle pawing, side turns, , shoulder bump, muzzle nudge, hip check, blinking, shared sniffing, face licking, play bows, lateral movements, exaggerated or repetitive movements, balanced mutual play, mirroring
Yellow	Calming signals, looking away, moving away, muzzle grasp, forceful pawing, hackles, scratching, shake off, staring, stiffening, sniffing in avoidance, stillness, staring for prolonged period, chase, pinning with quick release, body slamming, excessive barking, increased arousal, rough play, rearing on hind end when done by both dogs, stalking, mounting, T-ing
Red	Freezing, guarding, predation, offensive aggression, high arousal, bullying, play that scares or hurts a dog, stalking that scares a dog, pushing a dog to submission/defensive aggression