

PLAY...What Is It Anyway? And What Is It Good For?

October 15 – 19th, 2008 I attended the Association of Pet Dog Trainers' (APDT.com) annual 5-day behavior and training educational conference in Louisville, KY. Well-known and respected speakers, trainers, and behaviorists included Patricia McConnell, Ian Dunbar, Suzanne Clothier, Sophia Yin, Pia Silvani, and Victoria Stilwell ("It's Me or the Dog" on Animal Planet), as well as many others. An entire day was devoted to the subject of play behavior in dogs. I want to share some of those fun and fascinating insights with you from these amazing presenters.

What is play?

Play seems like such a simple concept, but the experts in dog behavior, including Dr. Patricia McConnell and others, find that play is actually difficult to define. Play behavior is so highly variable that any one description falls short. Dr. McConnell indicated that play appears to be highly pleasurable and that animals will search for a play partner in suitable circumstances. Play is rarely seen in animals physically or psychologically stressed, and is used as an indicator of wellness for many wild and captive populations. Current hypotheses for the purpose of play include:

- A training camp for physical strengthening and practice and mental dexterity;
- Preparation for the unexpected-- training the body to move and react quickly and flexibly;
- To provide and learn information about the abilities of others;
- Stimulate communal behavior;
- Develop social savvy in pups and help them learn their roles in real life;
- To determine social status outside of agonistic encounters.

Dog-dog interactions-- Does play need to be even?

I found it surprising to learn that little research today has examined dog-dog social behaviors. In order to understand canine behavior and how to interact and work effectively with our dogs, we also need to learn about how dogs interact with each other. When studying play in puppies, Dr. Camille Ward found that by 27 to 40 weeks of age puppies formed strong preferences about the partners they wanted to play with. She also researched whether puppies tended to take turns being in the "top dog/bottom dog" roles. What she found was that play does not need to be balanced or symmetrical for dogs wanting to play with each other and with puppies it tended to become more asymmetrical over time. Dr. Barbara Smuts, in her work with adult dogs found that certain factors seem to favor the top dog position, including age (the older dog is usually in the top dog position), size (when greater than 15 lbs), and status, if clear cut. The gender of the individuals was not found to matter.

Who's on top?

Many dogs can play either the assertive role or the receiving role; playing the receiving role is termed self-handicapping. Self-handicapping play signs include voluntary downs, muzzle licks, and being the one chased. Self-handicapping can occur when an older, healthier or stronger, more confident, or socially higher dog wants to encourage another dog to play. The more confident or able dog may take on the role of receiver to facilitate play. Assertive behaviors, which are the opposite of self-handicapping behaviors, include standing over the other dog, placing a chin over the other dog's shoulder, chasing, and muzzle bites. Play bows, with the front end on the ground, the back end raised and the head usually lower than the other dog's, is a clear signal from one dog to the other about play intentions. Self-handicapping + play bows = let's play! Both dogs initiating play is a good sign of welcome and healthy play. Positive play behavior signs Dr. Ian Dunbar detailed include bent elbow, seeing the dogs' tongue (open mouth), weight shifting, and "spazzo" movement. There is often full display of teeth in play, but without growling or snarling.

Are you in the mood to play?

Pia Silvani talked about appropriate vs. inappropriate play in dogs. She also spoke about the difficulty in defining

play. Play is not only a category of behavior, but defines a mental state as well. It is important to determine the animal's motivation and content. What is the animal's motivation and how do we know? In order to maintain a play mood, dogs must use behavior markers through communication, including olfactory, tactile, and auditory--not just visual. Random play bows throughout play are necessary or the dog may become socially conflicted. Play bows are used for many reasons. For two animals to continue a play mood both must be equally motivated to want to continue to play. If play bows are not performed throughout the session, the dogs may become agonistic (the range of activities associated with aggressive encounters), and the play mood may change.

The sweet sounds of play

Vocalizations are important to signal continued play and can be understood by us to know when play is escalating into something more volatile. Dogs may bark, whine, whimper, yelp, pant, chatter teeth, sneeze and growl during play. Or play can be completely silent. Other types of sounds to be aware of include:

- Low pitch is associated with aggressive signaling.
- High pitch is friendly, and may also indicate appeasement, or pain.
- A falling pitch can indicate aggression
- Hostile intentions are characterized by harsh sounds: raspy, growling, buzzing, snarling.
- Friendly vocalizations include whimpers, whines and squeaks
- Loudness often indicates urgency.

Using play to modify behavior

Dr. Karen London feels that play is underutilized in influencing behavior and is often not taken seriously (it is called "play" after all). She uses it to effectively treat some aggression issues including those types related to arousal, frustration or boredom, fear of strangers, and reactivity to other dogs. Play can be used to treat aggression by redirecting the dog to another behavior, using play as an incompatible behavior to aggression, being part of a fulfilling life, changing the emotions of the dog (counter-conditioning), and controlling arousal. Playful relationships are good relationships and play will only occur, she says, when individuals are comfortable and relaxed. Play is inhibited by hunger, fear, anger, separation distress, and any other negative emotion. Play is good for reducing stress and promoting good health.

Puppies gotta play!

In puppies, play is often used to establish rank. Playful aggressive encounters occur and various predatory components take place. Play fighting enables dogs to learn about their opponent's strength, agility, and desire to win. Information can be safely acquired without fights.

The benefits of play in puppies can't be over emphasized.

- Physical and mental exercise
- Socialization
- Teaching boundaries and rules
- Emotional control
- Bite inhibition- puppies with little or no bite inhibition tend to bite more vigorously and harder than normal. If they don't learn it as puppies, their bite as an adult will inflict much more serious damage.
- Teaching new skills

Bully puppies

Sometimes it is necessary to intervene early with bully puppies. Make their play sessions brief, pair them with an adult with good play skills, redirect to toys, and teach an on-off (arouse/settle) switch. To see if one puppy is truly bullying another, use the "bully test". Hold the 'bully' briefly away from the other pup. If the other puppy comes back at the more assertive dog to continue the play, then it is safe to let them play again and it should not be considered bullying. If the other puppy runs off or hides, then he or she was probably being bullied, or the top dog had a play style that was too assertive for the bottom dog.

Play must be fine-tuned. Animals must trust their playmate with an expectation that the rules will be followed.

Play sequences to maintain a play mood must be met to prevent play from escalating into aggression. Dogs exchange information on the run, from moment to moment, including subtle and fleeting eye contact, to make certain things are all right.

Using play as a training reward

Puppy (and dog!) play is valuable and can be used in training as a reward, but it is important not to allow the release of the puppy back to play until he or she is calm and mannerly. Insist upon fair play to prevent play from escalating to high arousal and then aggression. Be sure that there are frequent pauses in play to avoid over arousal; know when to allow them to work it out and when not. Bites should be inhibited and directed to the legs and lower body, with short mouthing to the neck and head area. Batting, brief pounces and pauses are all parts of good play. Dr. Ian Dunbar suggested interrupting puppy play every 20 seconds to briefly get the puppy's attention back to their trainer for brief moments.

Know when to interrupt dog play

There are specific signs that indicate that play between dogs should be interrupted, including:

- Dog is showing signs of distress;
- Excessive mounting and other challenges;
- Excessive vertical play;
- Excessive vocalization including throaty growls (most good play is actually silent);
- No interruptions or pauses in play (leading to high arousal);
- When one dog is avoiding the situation;
- When one dog is attempting to diffuse the session;
- When competing for a resource such as a toy or treat;
- Pinning
- Tandem sneezing (which indicates stress).

How to play with your dog

Patricia McConnell also spoke about play between humans and dogs. Anyone who has loved a dog knows that play enriches our relationship and strengthens our social bond. Play has a positive effect on our emotions, it involves healthy exercise, and is an excellent way to teach our dogs how to behave. And oh yeah...play is fun!

In soliciting play with a dog, the mood should be fun and light, the voice excited and upbeat, and the body should be relaxed. Some people have trouble eliciting play because they feel silly when they act goofy and playful. Try it; it's liberating and fun! There are certain signals that people can use that dogs appear to interpret as play solicitations.

- Start/stop movement or lunging
- Running toward or away from the dog
- Patting one's own chest
- Play bowing
- Grabbing the dog's paws (which she did not recommend)
- Touching or lightly pushing the dog's shoulder or rump (though some sensitive dogs may find this intimidating).

Certain signals appear to be ineffective including patting the ground, whispering, kissing the dog, picking up the dog, and barking at the dog! It is important to communicate your play intentions clearly.

Miscommunication about play can lead to dogs that are afraid of or aggressive to their owners, and dogs that misunderstand attempts at discipline as play solicitations. Because play often involves actions used in fighting and predation, it is critical that individuals clearly signal when they are being playful. Lucky for us, dogs are very clear about when they are playing, although people are not, at least with dogs!

Uh oh! Our game is over

The most serious problem related to play between people and dogs is the dog's level of emotional arousal. High

arousal can quickly escalate into rough play or aggression. Learning these signs is helpful to our relationship with our dogs and for us to know when to switch gears and stop play.

- Barks become higher pitched and more rapid.
- “Play growls” becoming lower and louder.
- Movements becoming less coordinated, as if out of control.
- Eyes becoming fixed and rounded.
- Commissure of the mouth (back corner where the top and bottom lips meet) retracts, even if the environment is not hot.
- Inability to switch gears and stop.

We need to pause frequently during play, just like dogs do. Dogs need to be taught, “All done!” to prevent over arousal. The trainer should work on the dog understanding an on switch as well as an off/settle switch. To turn off aroused play, the trainer should do the opposite of asking for play: stop all movement and be still, turn slightly away from, and not look directly at the dog, and while speaking in a quiet, calm voice, ask for a “Settle” or “All done“.

Play can reflect both the best and worst of our relationship with dogs. We can enjoy our fun play times together and prevent it from causing serious problems. Good play creates a bond between people and animals. Now go out there and play with your dog!