



## **Can My Dog Play with Yours?**

We all want our dogs to be able to get along with other dogs. Many people would like to take their dogs to dog parks, and watch them socialize with their own species. Others would just like their dogs to be civil with other dogs.

But all dogs do not like all other dogs, and we as owners need to be aware of this, and to plan for it. We take puppies from their moms at the tender age of 8 weeks for one reason only - to bond with humans and learn to live in our society. Why would we then throw that same dog back into the canine mix, with a bunch of dogs he doesn't know, and who might have some undesirable social qualities? Not necessarily a good idea. On the other hand, dogs should learn how to interact with others - so how do you teach them?

Most puppies tend to want to meet other dogs, and to play with them. Some dogs - in particular some breeds of dogs - will continue to love pretty much anyone throughout their whole lives. However, that's not true of all dogs. As dogs get older, they become more discriminating about their friends, just as humans do. This begins to happen at social maturity - anytime after 2 or so. Some adult dogs do not like any strange dogs at all. Dogs are community-oriented animals - as they mature, they usually interact primarily with their social group and they often see other dogs as a potential threat. Many would like a slow introduction, and some don't want any new relationships.

The process of canine greeting is and should be quite complex. Dogs communicate primarily with their bodies. Left with their canine mom, they'd learn how to approach strange dogs with respect. Often our dogs lack those skills, because they weren't exposed to knowledgeable adult dogs at the right time. As a result, some dogs greet other dogs by racing towards them pell-mell, possibly leaping all over them, or they bark and act afraid. It's our job to protect our dogs from inappropriate play behavior - and to help teach them who is safe and who isn't.

Recognizing play can be difficult at times. Generally speaking, dogs who are playing change their "roles" quite often, and their play is fairly jerky, with short freezes. Thus, one dog might be on top of another, and then, suddenly the second dog is on top. One dog might be chasing another dog, quickly turn and be chased. Often, play will be accompanied by "play bows," where one or both dogs will stretch out their forelegs, drop their front end and raise their hind end.

Some dogs play very noisily, while others are quiet. Some breeds or breed types play very differently from one another (for instance, German Shepherds tend to play growl a lot; Boxers tend to want to jump on top of other dogs; Labs often run into other dogs, sometimes accidentally, sometimes not). Problems can arise if two dogs have incompatible play styles, and have trouble communicating with each other.

A common mistake we humans make is thinking that a dog who growls or snaps is always the aggressor. Though that can be the case, it often isn't! Imagine a complete stranger walking up to you and giving you a hug – would you laugh and tell him he's wonderful? Of course not – you'd ask him to leave you alone, perhaps quite emphatically. We humans have greeting rituals, like quick eye contact, shaking hands, or just saying hello. We give each other space before initiating an intimate involvement. So too with dogs, who should approach each other politely and slowly, and then ask to play.

Another strange myth that has popped up lately is one that dogs are always trying to dominate each other. If dogs know each other – even for a few minutes – they may attempt to figure out who's stronger and smarter. However, body slamming (running into another dog) and mounting (self explanatory!) are actions of adolescent dogs and are usually just plain rude! The dogs are experimenting with their power; they're not actually trying to figure out whose boss.

Dominating behavior actually requires some sort of incipient or established relationship. Imagine yourself at a cocktail party, where there are a variety of people you don't know. Some will be more forceful than others, and some could actually be rude. Their actions, however, don't mean that they're establishing a relationship. That's just their way of communicating, crass as that may be. However, in a more formal relationship, such as a family, or work group, someone usually is the acknowledged leader. And that "boss" may NOT be the boss in another situation.

Until social maturity, we recommend that you socialize your dog to other dogs, but very carefully. One traumatic experience can shape his attitude towards other dogs forever. If he's being bullied at a dog park, you should leave immediately. If he begins to BE a bully, jumping on top of other dogs, or chasing them, he should only play with dogs who can handle that. If you think your dog is uncomfortable, frightened or acting inappropriately, you should take action. Think of yourself as a parent rather than an onlooker, and manage the environment as much as you can.

### **Socialization at Dog Training Classes**

During puppy classes, we encourage socialization, with a great deal of owner interaction. This is because the class is primarily to help your dog bond to you, and for you to develop communication skills with your puppy. Puppy classes are

not really playgroups, though compatible puppies can develop great relationships with each other. As the pups are playing, we as “parents” should be watching and intervening if necessary. Puppies that hide under chairs or their owners legs are not happy, and shouldn’t be forced to play. Pups that crash into other puppies have to be calmed down fairly often to avoid over-excitement.

Classes for adolescent and adult dogs tend to have little or no canine socialization time. As dogs get older, dog play and socialization can be very tricky to organize – as we indicated, some of the dogs in class are not interested in other dogs, and their feelings should be respected. In addition, classes are aimed at having your dog obey and respect you. In real life, you should be able to control whether your dog meets and plays with another dog. In many classes, we actually teach ways to get past other dogs without socializing!

Of course, we encourage you to make friends with other people in class and their dogs, and to set aside time for socialization.

The Marin Humane Society, Animal Behavior & Training, Trish King, Autumn—2002.