

Teaching your new puppy the right way to play

Puppies can play rough. So to ensure a lifetime of safe and happy interactions, learn how to play appropriately with your new puppy from the start.

Most puppy play consists of chasing, pouncing, barking, growling, snapping, and biting. So how can you tell the difference between normal play and possible signs of true aggression in your new puppy?

NORMAL PLAY BEHAVIOR

In normal play, a puppy may play bow (lower its head and raise its hind end), present its front end or side to the owner, hold the front part of its body up, wag its tail, dart back and forth, emit high-pitched barks and growls, and spontaneously attack. Of course, even normal play can become too intense.

AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR

Behaviors that may indicate a problem include prolonged, deep-tone growling; a fixed gaze; a stiff posture; and aggression that is situational or stimulus-dependent (not spontaneous). These aggressive behaviors may be related to fear, possessiveness, conflict, or pain. Talk to your veterinarian if your puppy is exhibiting these behaviors.

7 steps to proper play

Follow these steps to prevent inappropriate play:

1) Provide plenty of exercise.

New puppies are bundles of energy, so give them productive ways to expend that energy such as going on walks or playing "Monkey in the middle" (see *sidebar*).

2) Provide mental stimulation.

Rubber toys that can be filled with treats, such as Kong (Kong company) or Busy Buddy puzzle toys (Premier), offer puppies a chance to chase and bite the toys and obtain a food reward.

3) Play with your pup. Playing fetch or throwing a soccer ball for your pet to push around will sap some of your pup's energy.

4) Teach and review basic obedience commands. A well-trained dog is more likely to follow orders when behaving inappropriately.

5) Conduct leadership exercises.

Follow three rules to maintain overall order:

- **Nothing in life is free.** Ask your puppy to respond to a command such as "sit" before it receives anything it wants or needs.
- **Don't tell me what to do.** It's OK to give your puppy the love and at-

tention it needs, but if it becomes too pushy about getting attention, such as by nudging, whining, barking, or leaning, pull your hands in, lean away, and look away. Walk away if your puppy is too difficult to ignore. Once the puppy stops soliciting attention for 10 seconds, ask it to sit and give it attention.

- **Don't move without permission.**

Anytime you begin to move from one area of the home to another, ask your puppy to sit and stay for a second or two before you give it a release command to follow you.

- **6) Don't sit on the floor with your pup.**

This tends to get puppies excited, puts family members in a vulnerable position, and makes it more difficult to control the puppy.

7) Promote socialization.

Puppies must have frequent, positive social experiences with all types of animals and people during the first three or four months of life to prevent anti-social behavior, fear, and biting. And continued exposure to a variety of people and other animals as the puppy grows and develops is an essential part of maintaining good social skills.

NIPPING BAD PLAY BEHAVIOR IN THE BUD

If your puppy plays inappropriately, here are the right ways to handle it.

- **Distract the bad behavior.** Always have a toy on hand that your puppy can transfer its attention to.
- **Speak up and step out.** If your puppy is biting hard, yell “Ouch!” and stop playing.
- **Interrupt problem behaviors.** A shake can or a water gun will startle puppies and stop the behavior. But don’t use these techniques if a pet has a sensitive temperament or if they seem to make things worse.
- **Set up a dragline.** Both indoors and outdoors during supervised play, put the puppy on a leash that you can quickly grab to stop the behavior.
- **Use head halters.** These halters provide a more natural sense of control than ordinary collars do and limit the chances of biting.
- **Consider muzzles.** In extreme cases, muzzles may be used for short periods to prevent the biting behavior.
- **Give the puppy a time out.** If your puppy won’t stop a bad behavior, put it in a room or in its kennel with toys to keep it busy until it calms down.

WHAT NOT TO DO

You and your family should never use physical punishment, such as scruff shakes, alpha rollovers, squeezing the puppy to the floor, thumping its nose, or swatting.

Monkey in the middle: An exercise in obedience

This game not only exercises energetic puppies, it also reinforces the basic commands of “sit” and “come,” enhances name recognition, and teaches a puppy to run up and sit to get attention (instead of jumping up on people). At least two people are needed, and each person should have six to 12 small treats (regular puppy dinner kibble is usually adequate) at hand.

The two people sit opposite each other with about five to six feet in between. The first person calls “Skippy, come” in a high-pitched, upbeat voice. As the puppy approaches, the first person has the puppy sit for a treat. Immediately, the second person calls “Skippy, come” in a high-pitched, upbeat voice and has the puppy sit for a treat. Immediately, the first person calls again and has the puppy sit for a treat, and so on.

The distance between the two people can increase as the puppy becomes accustomed to the game—the people can even move into separate rooms, increasing the strength of the “come” command and the exertion needed to obtain a treat.



Remember, everybody wins when you take the time and effort to teach your new puppy how to play appropriately. You’ll gain a well-behaved pet, and the puppy is more likely to remain a happy, important part of the family.