

Play-Fighting

The benefits of properly played doggie games.

By Ian Dunbar, Ph.D., M.R.C.V.S.

No topic engenders such a wide range of conflicting advice than whether or not to play physical contact games with dogs, e.g. playfighting, tag and tug-o-war. Some breeders and trainers are vehemently opposed to these games, feeling they make a dog uncontrollable and more aggressive. Others, however, feel frequent games make for a better companion. Certainly, there are pros and cons to doing almost anything with a dog, and this includes roughhousing. Without a doubt, misguided and/or inadequately informed owners can very quickly turn a good dog bad by allowing contact games to get out of control. On the other hand, a thinking owner can derive many benefits from properly playing doggie games.

It is highly unlikely that dogs will become more aggressive by playing games with their owners. Quite to the contrary--game playing usually builds confidence and promotes friendliness. Perhaps the so-called increase in aggressiveness would be better-termed *excessive rambunctiousness*. Play-chasing, play-growling, play-mouthing and play-fighting happen when the dog is over-friendly. Nonetheless, regardless of how friendly the dog's intentions, unsolicited rambunctious roughhousing is often annoying and can be potentially dangerous. Human games and sports offer a good analogy, especially when the participants have been poorly coached and/or the game is badly refereed. It is not the games that are at fault; rather, potential problems come down to a matter of control. And so it is with canine games.

Establishing Control

Certain games do not have an intrinsic property to render dogs uncontrollable. Instead, it is the manner in which the owner allows the dog to play the game which influences the dog's tractability and willingness to comply. For example, many trainers incorporate game playing and the prerequisite teaching of game rules to reinforce their control over a dog. Alternately, allowing a dog to play willy-nilly, without instruction or guidance, would no doubt make it more difficult to control.

Control problems are threefold: 1) The owner allows the intensity of play to increase to the point where it may be physically dangerous; 2) The owner can no longer stop the dog from playing; and 3) The owner allows the dog to initiate unsolicited play sessions. In other words, the owner barely knows which end of the whistle to blow.

So, why not just stop playing these games altogether? For starters, dogs (especially adolescent dogs) are going to attempt to play this way with people anyway. In fact, much of a dog's waking existence--and certainly most of its playtime focus--is on mouthing (and/or biting) objects both inert and alive. Consequently, it makes sense to take time to teach the critter the rules. Further, many owners, especially men and children and especially boys (ranging in years from two to fifty-two), are going to play these games with dogs anyway. So it likewise makes sense to teach owners how to be better canine coaches so they may correctly referee Rover and reap these games' many benefits.

Fringe Benefits

First and foremost, games provide good exercise for dogs and owners-- good physical *and* mental exercise. Also, games are fun. As soon as the dog learns that it can have fun with its owner, it begins to focus its attention there, rather than always looking to other dogs for enjoyment and amusement. Similarly, owners learn they can actually have fun with their dogs. (Believe it or not, many owners have to be taught how to have fun with their dogs.) One of the best ways to motivate owners to train their dogs is by suggesting and describing games-- games, of course, which have been intricately integrated with basic obedience skills.

A number of trainers have designed entire obedience programs around game-playing, following the maxim "control the games and you control the dog." Indeed, there is nothing like a controlled game of tag to give moribund recalls a spark. Similarly, a dog's favorite tug-o-war toy is an ideal lure for teaching sighthounds to come, sit and heel; for teaching terriers anything (and everything); or for remotivating moose-like dogs and getting them to enjoy obedience and enthusiastically perform with verve and vigor.

The above advantages are really no more than attractive fringe benefits, however, when compared with the primary reasons for roughhousing and playing tag and tug-o-war with dogs. When played according to the rules, these games: 1) increase the level of control owners have over their dogs, specifically, by proofing control at times when the dogs are excited and worked up; and 2) motivate, build confidence and make dogs *less* aggressive, specifically, by improving and maintaining their bite inhibition.

Playing by the Rules

Any physical game, be it dodgeball, fencing, wrestling, agility, lure coursing or tug-o-war, requires rules to prevent participants from hurting each other. In fact, playing games is one of the best ways to teach rules to children and dogs. Games are designed to practice controlling the participants when they are bubbling with excitement. Dogs must be actively taught that the rules are always in effect, even though the dog might be beside itself with exuberance. The primary rule of any game is to stop playing when the whistle blows. In fact, the primary reason to play any physical game is to teach this prime directive: to stop playing immediately upon request.

You will find it is prudent to practice *beforehand*, when the game and the excitement are both under your control, rather than trying to teach the dog in a real-life situation. Never allow a dog to indulge in any enjoyable activity for long, uninterrupted periods of time and then stop the game altogether. Not surprisingly, the dog will not want to stop. Instead, let the dog play for as long as you like, or as long as the dog likes, but frequently stop the game for short time-outs. Why stop the game? To practice stopping the game, of course. Each time the dog stops playing on request offers proof you can control the dog no matter what it is doing. How to stop the

game? By telling the dog to sit, lie down or by giving any obedience command. Each time the dog stops playing and sits, you may reward it by telling it to resume playing once more. Thus, the game now becomes a reward *working for* training, rather than a severe distraction *in competition with* training.

Just as the dog must learn always to stop playing and respond appropriately on a single command, so must it also learn never to start playing unless requested to do so. It would be disastrous for a dog to take it into its head to initiate a game of herd-and-tag with a group of elderly people on an outing to a herding trial, to play tug-o-war with a child's Nerf football or to roughhouse with Grandpa in the middle of his TV dinner. Unintentional misfiring is easily prevented by using combination commands, in much the same way as some competition folk protect their obedience patterns and prevent anticipation.

For example, the dog is taught only to play tag on those occasions when the command "Tag" is given with the dog in a down-stay. Similarly, the dog is taught never to touch an object in a person's hand unless told "Take it" and, moreover, never to play tug-o-war unless the commands "Take it" and "Pull" are given in succession, while the dog is in a sit-stay.

Yes, but . . . this is all so complicated, you say. Why not just forbid owners and dogs to play these games at all? Well, there are two reasons: First (remember?), many owners and many dogs are going to try their darnedest to achieve uncontrollable rumbustiousness anyway; and, second, there is no better way to accomplish basic safety training (e.g., teaching a dog not to barrel unto, bump or jump up on people), or to maintain the dog's bite inhibition throughout adulthood.

Important lessons

Physical games are the best means to teach and reinforce specific rules about jaw-contact and jaw-pressure. Playing tag, the dog learns that no matter how wild and woolly the action, it must never touch, graze, glance, nose, paw or bump any part of a person's body with any part of its body. In tug-o-war, the dog learns never to touch any object held in a person's hand unless requested to do so and, when requested, to do so ever so gently, with butterfly-wing jaws. In playfighting, the dog learns to mouth hands only and never to mouth human hair or clothing. Why hands only? Because hands are extremely sensitive. During puppyhood, the dog learned never to exert pressure when mouthing, and by far the best way to maintain bite inhibition is to allow the adult dog to mouth hands on request. Why not mouth human hair or clothing? Because hair, scarves, ties, trouser legs and Wellington boots do not have neurons, and if the dog receives no feedback from its mouthing, it will bite down harder and its bite inhibition will gradually deteriorate as it gets older.

There's an added bonus to training with games: If the dog transgresses any of the above rules, physical punishments are absolutely uncalled for and reprimands are seldom necessary. If the dog bends a single rule, the owner simply says "Finish," walks away and that's that. The dog realizes any creative interpretation of the rules always abruptly terminates an otherwise thoroughly enjoyable game. Consequently, well-coached dogs learn to respect rules for canine games better than most humans playing tennis or ice hockey.

Dr. Dunbar is an animal behaviorist, veterinarian and dog trainer.