

# The WHAT: Canine Behavior in Playgroups



Photo by Brian George





# Candidates for Playgroups

All ages, breeds, temperaments  
It depends upon the dogs

**MOST IMPORTANTLY...**  
**the comfort level of the handler!**

**Be safe AND inclusive!**

**Assess bonded pairs/roomies separately –  
THEN together**

**CAUTION:** Only intro small dogs to KNOWN large dogs  
due to size/strength discrepancy!



# Body Language...Let's Lighten Up!

- **Pinned Ears**
- **Erect Tail**
- **Hackles**
  - Shoulders (offense)
  - Full body (defense)
- **Mounting**
  - Assertive (escalates to protest)
  - Sexual (tries again)
- **Necking**
- **Growling**
- **Showing Teeth**



Photo by Josh Feeney

**HINT: Don't focus on the minutia! Observe broadly.**



# Healthy Communication



Photo by Hany Hosny

**Warning:**  
Admonition, advice,  
recommendation

Their way of saying  
“I don’t want to have  
to be aggressive”

**Insecurity is exaggerated...confidence is subtle.**

# Clarifying Aggression

## Aggression:

- Can be legitimate communication
- What is “normal” and/or acceptable and what is aberrant?

## Defense:

- Will choose to avoid (freeze or flight)

## Offense:

- Will choose fight
- Typical triggers:
  - Predation
  - Territorial guarding
  - Resource guarding

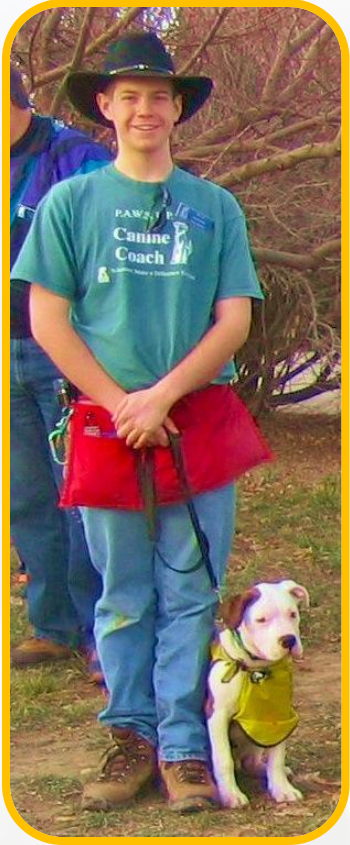


### **\*Defense vs. Offense\***

The behavior can look as concerning but is motivated differently, therefore, it should be considered and handled differently.



# Developing Healthy Behavior



## Puppies:

- Collaborate with medical
- Learn best from appropriate adult dogs about bite inhibition and responsive play behavior
- Must be socialized with playful and/or tolerant dogs only—no unsocialized, fearful, defensive, or offensive adults
- Can socialize with other puppies but must be monitored against developing bad habits



# Play Styles, Labels, and Social Categories

Important to identify and monitor each dog's play style, energy level, and other important categories and labels to ensure well-matched groups

*Labels/categories are not intended to define each dog and are not to be rigidly adhered to at the expense of the dog*

*By actively observing how the dogs are engaging with one another during each playgroup and fluidly adjusting each day to meet each dog's needs, we can ensure valuable learning experiences for dogs and handlers!*



**ALL DOGS ARE INDIVIDUALS**

THANK YOU, Animal Farm Foundation!





# Understanding Play Styles



## Gentle and Dainty = Tea Party

- Very Mutual
- Minimal physical contact
- Relatively quiet
- Frequently starts & stops
- Easily becomes nervous with rough play



# Understanding Play Styles



## Rough & Rowdy = Grapplers

- Mainly mutual
- Usually noisy
- Very physical
- Grabbing and holding
- Chasing and tumbling
- Escalates and de-escalates
- Can trigger conflict



# Understanding Play Styles



## Push & Pull = Tag

- Sometimes mutual
- Movement motivated
- Chasing, driving, heeling
- Can get noisy with demand barking
- Can be antagonistic to others



# Understanding Play Styles



## **Seek & Destroy** = Predator and Prey

- Rooted in prey drive
- Not as mutual looking TO US, but they are role-playing
- Often noisy (growling and squealing)
- Can escalate
- Can tend to require handler intervention
- Can be provocative to others



# Compatible & Incompatible Play Styles

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Generally, same play styles do well together

Push & Pulls tend to respond to energy level

Rough & Rowdies LOVE to play together—if the handler is comfortable enough to let it RIP!



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Rough & Rowdies, Seek & Destroys, and Push & Pulls can be combustible

Gentle & Dainties don't prefer to play with the more energetic play styles



# Observations from Playgroups



**Playful:** consistent gestures to initiate play. Quick to avoid and/or diffuse defensive or offensive aggression.

**Unsocialized:** overly aroused and/or reactive despite appropriate social gestures from others.

**Fearful:** generally overwhelmed by environment, handlers and other dogs (with or without defense).

**Prey-like:** fearful with immediate flight response, usually accompanied by high pitched vocalization.

**Tolerant:** passively avoids overt playful and/or antagonistic gestures.

Photo by Nick Carranza



# Observations from Playgroups

**Defensive:** doesn't initiate aggression but responds to challenge or bullying with aggression.

**Offensive:** seeks out opportunities to aggress.

**“Dominant” aka confident:** with calm leadership qualities. Might appropriately correct obnoxious behavior. Might appropriately submit antagonistic behavior. Will effectively diffuse aggression. Will most likely ignore indifferent dogs and will play with appropriate dogs of either sex.



Photo by Nick Carranza





# Dog Sociability Categories

(Adapted from BAD RAP)



**Dog Social:** appropriate and playful with other dogs

**Dog Tolerant:** usually more tolerant than playful or shows no interest

**Dog Selective:** plays with some dogs while intolerant of others; requires detailed description

**Dog Defensive:** playful with some dogs but reactive to dogs that challenge or threaten

**Dog Offensive:** not able to play with or tolerate other dogs – will aggress



# Greeter & Helper Dogs: Cherish and Protect!

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## Greeter Dog:

- Happy to meet new dogs – “make new friends”
- Playful and puppy-like
- May not be emotionally stout enough to handle rude behavior from another dog – “get their feelings hurt”
- Useful for assessments and adding playful energy

## Helper Dog:

- Demonstrates ability to give and take appropriate corrections
- Mentally and physically stout enough to withstand rude or inappropriate behavior from another dog
- Able to defend themselves, if necessary
- Useful for assessments and socializing selective dogs