

Ain't what you do it's the way that you do it-how to be a dog toy

28 January 2022

Large print blog with live links!

Did you know YOU can play with your dog too? Not a toy, ball, rope or stick but YOU!



Play with dogs is far more complex than you may realise. But once you get the hang of how dogs do it, quality time with your dog can only improve!

The posh term for this is

Dyadic interspecific play

(dyad= between two living creatures)

(inter= between)

(specific= only those particular living creatures)

but unless you really want to dig into the **science and psychology** to it in studies like [this](#), [this](#) or [this](#) knowing what to do, **how and why it works is more important than knowing what it's called.**

So by using your body to play, dogs whether they connect with toys or not can learn how to 'be' with you in a way they can see makes you happy; and a way that makes them content and fulfilled.

With this in mind, when you start play with your dog, or they start with you, make sure they can see clearly what you are doing. **These are the big three DOS and DONTs in quarantine and decompression.**

1. **DO keep yourself at least 12 inches or 30cm away** from them so they can see you properly, as dogs are long sighted. If still in the quarantine period as much as is practical imagine the dog is in a Covid social distance bubble and stay that far away.
2. **DON'T creep up** with your hand or a toy in your hand from the side when they first arrive- the [position of a dog's eyes](#) gives them very good peripheral vision and such a 'sneaky' movement will spook them at first as they'll see it before you think they can, and not understand what you're doing.
3. **DON'T get in a dog's 'blind spot'** just under the nose.

Of course, once you know your dog and there's a good trust bond, 'sneaky' play from the side often gets a very excited

reaction!

In general, **dogs will actually prefer to play with you**, even over other dogs or toys (in whatever combination) if they get the choice once decompressed and they **trust you** fully.

We **bred them to prefer our company** after all, and some breeds that deliberately breed small but not for working tasks like ratting, or are **child like even as adults** with large eyes Frenchies and Pugs and their mixes to be even more **dependent on us for everything** than the average dog. Therefore it's hardly surprising they often want and need us in play. **Doesn't say much about us as a species though.**

Is it ok for them to play with toys and other dogs as well as me when a dog first comes?

Of course, within reason! While we do don't allow it during quarantine, as long as they show positive signs of wanting to do that (**play signals**- see below- that are **happy and not desperate** or **mixed with stress signals**) then you can show them all the family **gradually**- human or otherwise, who they need to learn and engage well with as they settle. Then they can start to learn your body language and you theirs.

However, neither a lava or a kettle dog may even know what a toy is yet, when they first arrive, so you have that puzzle to think about as well... Or they may just be too stressed absorb the new place- in such cases **herbal calmatives** are very much recommended.

Some dogs will never be huge on toys and may **prefer human-dog play**, and/or **other dog/co-operating animal** (cats etc) play, or **play disguised as treat based reward training** rather than full on play, or the other way round. Over time you will find **which types of play they respond to best.**



It is never a good idea to encourage dog + dog play with a food stimulation toy! Cartoons like this are oversentimental and oversimplified- and dangerous.

Or they might want to do some actions and play more than others, and different ones, as they decompress and settle. And **you'll learn their preferences as they settle** and you watch them and engage with them. But from get go the dog is trying to get you to **accept them and love them**, so they can swing between these actions, and between being lava and kettle, in first stage decompression play.

When dogs play with other dogs, it is or should be a part natural, part learned deliberate set of repeated positive actions they know, or hope, when meeting a new dog, that the other dog will react to in a positive way and play back. It must

never constantly be full on play
and

must have **pauses**

or complete disengagements,

even **sleep**

before play starts again.

It can be the same for you and your dog too and such positive and healthy play helps dogs develop important life skills and experiences that promote good physical and mental health.

Praise phrases

The easiest way to show you are happy is to have your own (consistent) happy/approval noises and movements in response to actions the dog does like a soft hand clap or thumbs up along with words like

‘good job’,

‘good boy/girl’,

‘well done’,

‘clever/bravo’

or even a sound like ‘yay’ or ‘woo’

immediately (don't delay; they'll forget what was 'being good' if you do) **when they show play body language and/or**

play in way you feel you can reciprocate (return.) You could praise words used by their fosters as well- just ask the rescue what they were if you haven't been given the list already,

But **always say what action was good-** like

‘clever catch!’ (of a toy or treat)

‘play with toy, good job!’

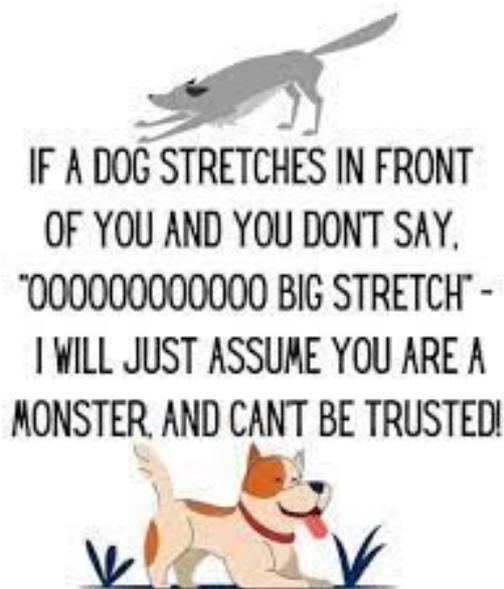
or ‘good stop’ in a softer voice if they quickly calm down after some hectic play.

Dogs can learn a lot of words and not just single ones, they do **understand and even prefer short instructional phrases and questions** structured simply like

Name + praise phrase + question

‘do you want to play’ or ‘where’s that toy’ or ‘who’s got your foot’ (through a blanket or directly) so they can respond better and be a good boy or girl for you. Adding ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ can also work if only because of the **tones** we as humans

use when we say them. You can back this up with **hand signals** too.



[This may be a joke- but this action could also be a play bow \(see below\) so praising a stretch is not such a silly idea after all!](#)

Can toys be a good way to show my new dog it's ok to play?

The short answer is sometimes yes but not always. As you have hopefully seen in our [toys blog](#) there are [so many, sometimes too many, different types of toy](#) you can get for your dog. It's important to know which types of toys produce what emotional reaction (displayed in the body language and behaviour) in the dogs for [balanced, healthy play](#), especially as they decompress. And when to play, and not to play with toys (which can be called **indirect play**) or with your dog **directly**, or a combination of **both types of play**.

So there are [two types of play](#)- **direct play** and **indirect play**. Of course **toys** are great because they are **indirect play** aids. In other words **you do not need to touch the dog to play** with them and you can sit or crouch down at more of

a **distance** and thus seem **less threatening**.

Direct play is you- your body!

The more **nervous** or more **lava dogs** may **run or hide** when you try **direct play** at first but **thrive on more indirect play**, just like they often accept **grooming** better with a curry comb as they can't feel your hand, only the brush, **solo play** where they work out what toys are for themselves, or **fuss though a blanket** or coat. **Kettle dogs** may want to engage both you and the toy sooner, and sometimes very boisterously.

Both extreme ends of these behaviours for lava and kettle dogs like this are stress reactions. And too much reliance on toys and treats alone to get the behaviour you want is **not ideal long term** for any dog. They need to be able to **trust your touch, your voice and your movements.**

What can I do to start getting to ready to direct play with my new dog?

Start by observing the dog, for a good 48 hours. The quarantine period is perfect for this. There's no need to close observe and it's likely to be too much too soon for the dog anyway to have you that close.

Once you notice your dog's general body language, you can start by using

1. MIRRORING.

What is Mirroring? _

It means you copy **what the dog does**- let their actions guide you (great for first stage decompression) and is well known to psychologically put dogs and other humans at their ease as it is a consistent way to start negotiating for a relationship. Let them make the first move or approach.

Once you see your dog's 'play signals' in the way they

1. **'talk'** (growl, grumbles, barks, whimpers, howls)
2. and **hold their bodies** (ears, eyes, tail, stance)
3. bring you gifts or greet you in **play, welcome, excitement, anxiety, boredom or deference**.

you can do some of these play signals back to them show you have time to play when they have asked (you may not have time, always, so they need to know when **it's ok or not ok to ask**).

Play signals can include:

1. **Bowing**, (stretching out front legs with their bums in the air),
2. **'Tap-dancing'** (very noticeable on wood or tile floors!)
3. Very fast full side to side **tail wagging**, fully up or half up
4. **bright open and happy eyes**, some whites of eye can be seen in excitement
5. showing their **belly**, although this could also be submission or general attention seeking/ an attempt to evade a 'punishment' they are expecting by looking 'cute' so that isn't always healthy, or they have an itch they can't reach
6. A different **more puppy like growl to usual**, and/ or **sneezing**
7. **licking and yawning** (though excessively doing these can also be a sign of stress). Licking them back is usually not advised though as it often means submission and that will confuse the human-dog dynamic.
8. **High 'happy' puppy bark** (but sometimes shelter dogs don't know which bark is which yet so can send mixed signals to you and resident dogs) with or without
9. **'smiling' and teeth 'clacking'** together like they're laughing-

they could be showing ROM (Relaxed Open Mouth), appeasement, the “threat gape” in fight-flight situations or even copying your smile the best the way their faces are made allow. They will take cues from other dogs as well.

10. **suddenly running** off/up and down and back to you or near you (with or without something they have decided is a toy).

11. **lunging at you** or another dog or a desired item they want to play with, sometimes instead of doing 1-10 first because they **aren't sure how to ask you or resident dogs how to play** (without or without ‘happy sounds’)

12. Head tilting/focusing on you/your face, with or without

13. **tongue out** and **panting** (can mean excitement or stress so be careful especially during decompression). It can also mean something more serious like tooth pain, dental disease, mouth cancers or the genetics of the dog breed.

14. **patting and/or pawing/clawing** at one of your body ‘play zones’- arms/hands, legs/feet, and yes, head! Discourage the head patting as dogs’ aims are notoriously bad and you could end up with a claw in the eye! This could also mean ‘I need the loo’ though...

15. or if they **jump up without permission on your ‘cushion/chill zones’**- stomach, thighs, butt, and smaller more sensitive soft tissue areas like upper arms or slink behind your legs without asking to come up first, but not to settle or sleep. This one is best **gently discouraged** unless they are asking you to be their safe space.

Finally, don't do anything to the dog you wouldn't like yourself!

How Kids SHOULD Interact with Dogs

Use common sense.

Be polite and kind to pets



Learn to recognize when your dog is scared or anxious



Play appropriate games with pets, such as:

Fetch



Training tricks (like roll over, shake, beg, etc.)

Walking and running with a dog



Playing hide-n-seek

Always remember:

Supervise all interactions. Accidents can happen in a split second.



Train your dog to associate the kids with positive experiences so he'll be more likely to tolerate your child in case she accidentally interacts inappropriately.



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We do have a blog on training your kids, but this little chart could also be very useful, though again the warning on relying too much on food to 'bribe' or introduce people is not a good idea as they could lunge or snap for the food on other occasions when it's not for them. We also don't recommend mirroring when standing or bending over for very young kids as their balance is not great and they could get hurt.

As time goes on they may engage in a more direct way with

you, or a toy. Again kettles tend to do this faster than lava dogs, but they're still stressed even as kettles and neither will cope well with **too much non focused play too soon**. Some dogs may come to you directly for fuss or cuddles or play paw batting and the like, but others may choose to engage more indirectly at first: coming at you from the side, coming close then running away, not wanting to look at you directly and so on. You can and should still **use all your body to show you approve of their action**.

Like cats, they can and do **bring you 'gifts' in indirect play**. And yes, also like cats, if they bring you 'food' like dead or half dead animals they've captured or found, half eaten food from the bin (they can be very good at getting into even sealed bins and cupboards, opening doors to rooms, stairgates and the fridge-they can think this is a wonderful game and you need to show them that other games are better!), food wrappers, tissues etc they are trying to help you hunt for food. Or just have fun. Or tease you/wind you up. Some breeds or breed mixes like terriers and other 'small game' hunters; sighthounds like greyhounds and whippets, and retrievers and other 'gun dog' breeds and mixes can be more prone to this than others.

If they bring a toy to play 'tug', make sure it's not food, and have a command or obvious body language to show that yes, it's ok to play tug now!

unless you want them to think anything in your **hands** (which to a dog are play zones- see later in the blog) is a **game** and **snatch** it from you, even eating it or burying it before you can retrieve it.

Here you may want to yell at them for **bringing something 'nasty'** into the house or living area or dragging something yuk out of the bin... but **don't!**

- Use this as a **Mirroring exercise**,
- **copy their happy** body language
- and **make a big deal** of the present they just brought to you.

But try to swap it to a toy or something they like asap or have a little play with them with a (treat) reward at the end of the play session if they do well, to divert them from the 'gift' if it's inappropriate or gross. This is not the same as them being destructive when you aren't supervising them of course.

And you may just have to accept that **your dog shows love and happiness in other ways** or they aren't particularly tactile or aren't playful dogs by nature. But never forget sometimes it can take months and longer for them to **connect the dots about love, play and you;**

and play with you with or without toys, so don't stop just because they don't engage without overnight especially as they decompress. Conversely, **if they want to full on play with you right away and this is not normal either**, it is often a sign of a dog who has or is developing an anxiety or **fear bond** with their adopter, being too full on with them without pausing, and/or with other/resident pets, trying to **get approval all the time**.

With this in mind, they may start to do the following:

Either bringing over **something that belongs to them** _

whatever they've decided is their comfort toys often the one to show you basic trust, but not always- if they bring you an **interactive toy** like a ball or rope they are pretty much **shouting at you to play** once they know what one is for. For all the other types a toy a dog might play with and bring to

you see the [toy blog](#)) The minute you even **smile or frown** at your dog when they bring you a toy, you have **encouraged or rejected** the behaviour as **yes dogs [can read facial expressions!](#)**

Doing a 'job' like fetching something and bringing it to you can **release nervous energy**, that has built up through the day or night, especially if you've been out a while and the dogs are processing your return. So keep some toys by the front door or the bottom of the stairs that they can get excited at for those first few frantic minutes. It may not work especially at the beginning, but with dogs **repetition** is 80% of the secret. When you give them routines and set actions to do daily, as they decompress, the fewer stress or over excited or inappropriate play signals they often show.



[They may bring the ball to you, but will they drop it?!](#)

Or bringing something that belongs to you-

they know this will **get a reaction** (chasing, raising tone, asking them to drop it.) Sometimes they're doing it for **approval** and can't find a toy to bring so get **anxious** and start grabbing at items they have seen you use. Sometimes they get obsessed by socks or shoes; tea towels, used tissues or oven gloves... If this happens, have a calm command word ready for dropping an item they should not have, or a hand signal, replace with

one of their things and make a small deal of it as possible. The **less they complain/growl**, hold onto it or react (snapping or moving to get it back and so on) **the quicker they can get a reward like play with you** (the highest reward) and/or a high value treat once they have stopped focusing on your stuff and are only engaging with theirs. Else you'll end up with **constant toddler mentality** where all attention is good attention, and you do not want that habit forming as they won't just grow out of it! Our [toys blog](#) explains more about how dogs can be a little like toddlers...



Of course, dogs will take stuff that smells of you! Training for service dogs takes advantage of this for tracking, finding belongings for the vision impaired or even detecting cancers in humans!

How can I mirror or copy a dog?

To put it simply, you could do **any of the play signals above**, within reason anyway!

Such as

- **stretch your arms** out pointing to the floor too like a bow (on the floor if you're agile!) as your 'Ok, let's play too' signal if they bow.



You can do this seated as well, just lean forwards with your upper body.

- **head tilt** back at them while stretching your arms out to repeatedly touch your knees with your hands to emphasise the starting to play action.



Dogs do this to see or understand you better (see our toys blog as well for more on this!

- **widen your eyes, smile** (back) with some teeth visible and make happy surprised noises. Long time domestication and breeding of dogs has meant they have evolved facial expressions that can also express as wide eyes and smiles.

But take care! They are mimicking us too! So we often **project certain human emotions onto them in ways we don't with other**

animals, regardless of what they might actually be feeling.



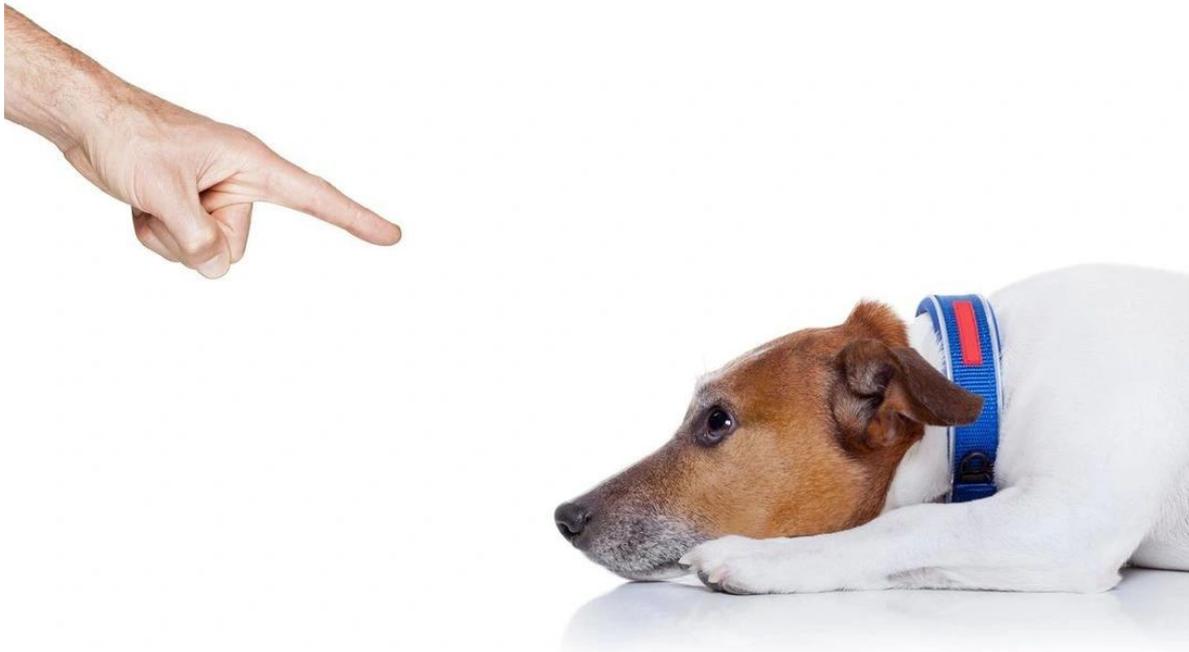
Image via Reddit

Maybe not quite this much! Photos like these are often in 'list articles' on social media as we find these resemblances funny, but there could be more to it than that...

- if they make little or **happy noises** respond with one of your own verbal cues like '[dog's name] + play' in happy tones
- **to reinforce they are heard and understood combine this with 'feel good' direct actions** like fussing them (gently during decompression) or even **grooming** them or **indirect play** like engaging with the toy they bring. If they lose interest in that toy you could offer them another in a similar way- if they drop it on your lap or feet you try and

do the same by them near them or on their feet, or moving your hand or foot holding the toy across the floor slowly at first then speeding up if they engage/ like playing with a toy like that.)

- **DON'T say 'no' and point at the dog** or the item you don't want them to engage with, this will just **confuse** them as they have no ability to make a movement like that, and are just reacting to the angry or disappointed tone of voice.



They don't understand this at all!

What if my dog doesn't seem to be showing any play body languages or sounds? Or the sounds and body aren't matching up to what I'm expecting?

Ex street, abandoned or kill list dogs often have this issue, or dogs taken from their mums and sibs too soon so they don't get

that vital play socialisation. Sometimes even a dog with a better start in life **needs some extra help to get started in playing and showing they want to play** in a way you and other dogs can understand. They may be showing **inconsistent body language** like low growling at one end but wagging their tail off at the other for example. Or their **hackles are up**, which does not always mean they're angry! Of course **the best 'person' to do that is a resident dog** (provided that dog was decompressed right and never fear bonded) as it **shows the dog what sorts of language you recognise**, but if you don't have one (make sure all solo dogs get to meet other dogs regularly in home and out and about) then **you'll just have to do, and do it instead!**

You can use that list above, mobility and house and garden set up/space depending, as they are usually **universal play positions**. But **don't try dog sounds** yet as you may confuse, overexcite or upset them. They don't even know (much) English yet, or the play rules in your house so they're learning everything all over again, or from scratch.

SUPER IMPORTANT! PLAY MUST HAVE BOUNDARIES

In the stages of decompression- those first few days and weeks after the dog arrives, start the way you mean to go on.

Gentle consistent repetition is where you start so they can learn what to do in play or training.

Then, so they know for sure you are a human and can't be played with in the same way as a dog; or a toy.

Show them

you + dog is fun
and
you + toy is fun,
but **that you are not the toy!**

As such, **low or angry growling, mouthing and nipping is to be discouraged gently at all times** and actions from you like

- **distracting with something better** to chew and reinforce with positive tones when they transfer fast to the acceptable item
- **saying ‘ow’ or ‘hurts’ in a high pained tone, holding out the body part** they nibbled at a bit too hard but not in their direction. Sometimes they will lick it to see how injured it is and it does come across as an apology as they calm down. **Even this negative reaction can be attention they crave to an overwhelmed dog**, so if they don't calm down right away when you show or pretend they have hurt you
- check you're **not invading their space-** are you in their safe space area too much (cleaning/tidying) or keep throwing toys and treats into the safe space or invisible personal space bubble (all humans and domesticated animals have these.) If the **dog invades your bubble too soon** or when you are busy, you can ask them to move back out of it as well, with a command word or gesture that is clear. You may have to gently manually move them out of your 'bubble' at first and put them in/lead or encourage them to or by their safe spaces- especially with kettle dogs. The same goes for **if dogs push each other out of the way too much**, or some dogs get stuck at the back or bottom of the happy play pile and aren't liking it, you have to calm it all down and, **when all is quiet, see if they start up play again.**
- **complete withdrawal and decompression** rebooting of leaving them totally alone; not talking to them

or looking at them; like they are back in quarantine, just seeing to basic needs (food, bed/blankets, drink, loo) check what you can tell of their mood, leaving them a comfort toy or other sensory toy to focus on, or even go to sleep with or on while **processing**

- But **make sure you are giving them the same space and body respect as you want** and/or they seem to need by how they react to you. Invading their space also includes **trying to get them to play when they don't want** to, taking them **out of their bed/** fussing them in their beds **when they're asleep** or have their **backs to you** or are **tired** or already **over stimulated**.

SUPER IMPORTANT! PLAY MUST HAVE PEAK ACTIVITY AND RESTS _

When should I stop play?

Dogs would never play with no pauses in the wild.

When **they've had enough**, see what their reaction is- do they (for example)

- look down or away,
- flinch
- ears drop, eyes show more white at the edges,
- licking, yawning, panting
- **stiffen** in the shoulders
- **circle** or walk away,
- jump or **spin** away,
- go to their safe space without asking and they don't usually do this,
- start getting really **manic and exaggerate** their excited body language to the point of being (over) alert (kettle dogs)

are prone to this one especially)

- start **really panting** and they've not played enough for them to be tired yet,
- leave the room,
- growl/bark/whimper/howl unexpectedly or starts to do it more than 'usual'
- **show exaggerated behaviour** like lightning fast obedience often coupled with submissive belly showing
- **decrease engaging with you in general** and instead doing solo play more instead of less as they decompress which can be boredom as well as a **lack of trust that you'll play and not stop playing if they don't want to right now/any more.**

Of course **some dogs just love solo or indirect play**, but it's always something to consider.

While we **don't recommend you growl or make 'dog noises' back** in general until you know your dog and their different types of noise very well indeed, you can show them the same when play time needs to be over.

So MIRROR their 'enough' body language as well.

1. Show you have **understood them and agree** yes it's time to stop and relax.
2. **Drop your hands by your sides** and slowly **turn your back** and start doing something else; with a firm but gentle 'no thank you' moving up to a firm 'you will not' and a request to **go to their safe space**, or at least away to a blanket or bed if they have got the hang of beds yet if they don't get the message.
3. **Everyone in the room/house needs to do the same** else they'll just go to someone else for attention/play when really they need to



and get overexcited and stressed instead.

4. And you need to **respect their wish to stop, or not start** play as well. **Dogs need body autonomy when engaging with humans** even more than other dogs and not be picked up or played with randomly especially by people new to them else you'll have a very wound up, stressed dog on your hands!

Lava dogs are much **more likely to fear bond** and get snappy if you let this happen. As for **kettles**, **sometimes it's try and stop them** engaging, and **frustration** *you're* not doing it right and that can also make them snappy! So sometimes we and our visitors need to start the

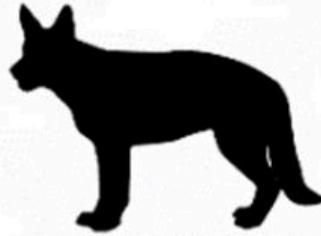
**STOP,
REST**

and PROCESS routine with the dog too, so they get **consistent treatment from everyone**. And so **we as their adopters** need to 'get the message' too.

The fact that **excited body language and stressed body language can look very similar** especially in a dog you don't know

very well yet can lead to issues so always bear in mind the dog can get to saturation level and **need to stop faster than you might think.**

DOG TO ENGLISH TRANSLATION CHART



CALM & NEUTRAL



RELAXED



ANXIOUS & NERVOUS



ALERT



PLAYFUL



FRIGHTENED



EXCITED



DOMINANT



SUBMISSIVE



AGGRESSIVE

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How quickly can you tell which emotion the dog is displaying? Especially with a new dog in the home.

How else can I use my body to play healthily with a dog? _

In first stage decompression you can start off the good bond between you and you dog by

- making the playing rules very obvious,
- splitting your body into play and not play (or chill) zones
- and splitting times of day into 'yes we can play' and 'no we can't play' areas and times.

2. CUSHION/CHILL ZONES

Along with Mirroring, you can try this method of play.

What are cushion or chill zones?

The most obvious cushion/chill zones on the body are

- the stomach
- lap (thighs). Smaller dogs especially like to sit on you, but it's not just smaller dogs. They do it to find higher viewing point where they can **clearly see their surroundings**, or because they like to be **warm**, or because they want to **get away** from other dogs, noisy children, or other adults or dogs.



Try not to fuss them too much if they want up on your lap while they are in first stage decompression.

But you could include the

- chest
- soft upper arms/under the chin.

Unlike the **play zones** below (arms and hands, legs and feet) these areas are **not as strong and mobile so cannot stand up to dog play as easily**. Another place is the 'triangle' or 'rectangle' shape you can make with your legs if you sit forward on a chair or sofa, with knees forward and legs straight from the knee. It also happens to be a chair yoga position as well- The Seated Mountain Pose. **Seated yoga** is great for people on the go or with disabilities to stay supple and healthy too.



Behind the legs, when seated or on a walk, can be a very good chill or safe space for your dog. If they are there don't overfuss them, but instead if other dogs, adults or kids ask to engage with the dog, refuse.

Have a name for that area too,

- a phrase like 'come safe' (transferable to recall on walks so they know how and where to recall back to)
- or a **silly out of context 'safe' word you'd not normally use** like 'Fred' or 'banjo' with an instruction verb like 'come' or 'sit' so the dog knows they can retreat to it if play; especially with another dog; is getting a bit much for them.

Yes you **can** be their safe space just as much as a bed or blanket!

So use these areas as

- a safe quiet place to take a short rest,
- or (as long as you don't mind it becoming a habit) a place for your dog to sleep and process after play.

Now your new dog is going to do all sorts of things in play you might not expect- suddenly run and hide, nibble the corner of a cushion or a finger, fall off the sofa, get upset by things you see as normal- answering your phone during play, or changing the TV channel have 'zoomies' (running up and down suddenly and super fast), snatch up a toy and want to play with you with that, or have a sudden stop of activity where they look at you as if they're not sure why they're playing, or why they are there.

However, as soon as you see **desperate body language** from the dog (wide eyes, stiff body, tail suddenly slowing wagging erratically or speeding up, hackles all over that seem to be contradicting the dog's actions, lunging to lick you or scrabbling to get on your lap for cuddles), and the **likelihood of fear bonding** has just **gone up by 100 times**. So it's **time for the human to step in**.

That is when, as we say in our [more detailed decompression blog](#) you can be the human **cushion/chill zone**, and slowly **de-escalate the excitement levels**

1. with **lower and [softer vocal tones and soothing words](#)**,
2. Use a **herbal calmant** like a plug in, herb mix or liquid that you can put on beds, blankets and in their food. [This link](#) shows you how to make it yourself in three easy steps and where to buy the ingredients.
3. try **relaxing music**, or that TV show you found they like, or nature sounds, or meditation music at certain musical frequencies you have found the dog likes on in the background,
4. providing they are past first stage decompression you can try **brief secure hugs** holding them still, or using a thunder shirt
5. and **[slower and slower stroking](#)** that mimics the interaction between a mum and her pups, which should release the **usually calming hormone oxytocin**. (More on the most important dog hormones and which to look out for are in the [toys blog](#).) Then take your hands off or just leave them resting neutrally on the dog.
6. **Use a blanket to cover them** (and you if they're on your lap) as far as they will tolerate. They may **chew** (play) or **suckle** the blanket and that's ok but if they do suckle it usually means they were taken from their mum too soon so will be more prone to anxiety- keep an eye on that and **discourage** any reactions to the blanket that seem **stress based or compulsive behaviour**. Slowly get the blanket to cover more and more of

the dog as they decompress and get used to blankets. This can be done any area they like best to chill on/under (you'll learn these as you get used to your dog)

- your lap
- or chest/stomach/upper legs if lying down
- with them (and/or you!) on the floor
- or the leg/chair safe space 'triangle'.

This **calming** or '**gentle time**' '**sleepy time**' or '**time out**' or **hand signal** (whatever command phrase or gesture you find works for the dog) one can be very useful for all decompressing and processing dogs, but even more so for **kettle dogs** and their close cousins: the **limpet dogs** (the clue is in the name...) as they are very prone to getting overstimulated which can make them stressed and even snappy. However for **lava dogs just being that close to the human can be stressful for them**, so a floor or 'leg triangle' fuss to gently get the point across will help.



Here we can see a dog stressed by fireworks. Notice the wide eyes and pupils with 'half moon' whites and an unwavering gaze.

For both lava and kettle dogs having a blanket to hand to slowly and gently cover them, fussing them through the blanket (indirect contact) with can also help them to **get out of 'crazy' or 'desperate' or 'overexcited' or 'overwhelmed' mode** as well as start to **establish a night time,**'gentle time'/ 'sleepy time'/ 'time out' **routine** that involves a little healthy play to burn off a little energy before bed, then a very clear slowing down and lying down routine, which of course can include a cuddle if the dog's up for it.

Play is great, but without boundaries can stress your dog and you, causing problems down the line.

As well as showing them they **don't have to be in top gear or high alert all the time to be a 'good dog'** and the **calm between play can be just as fun**, it reinforces the bond of trust with your dog. Make very sure that your soft and squashy bits are not play zones like your body extremities. Show them clearly that **even in play they can stop and have a safe rest**

without being ambushed (you starting play again with no warning.)

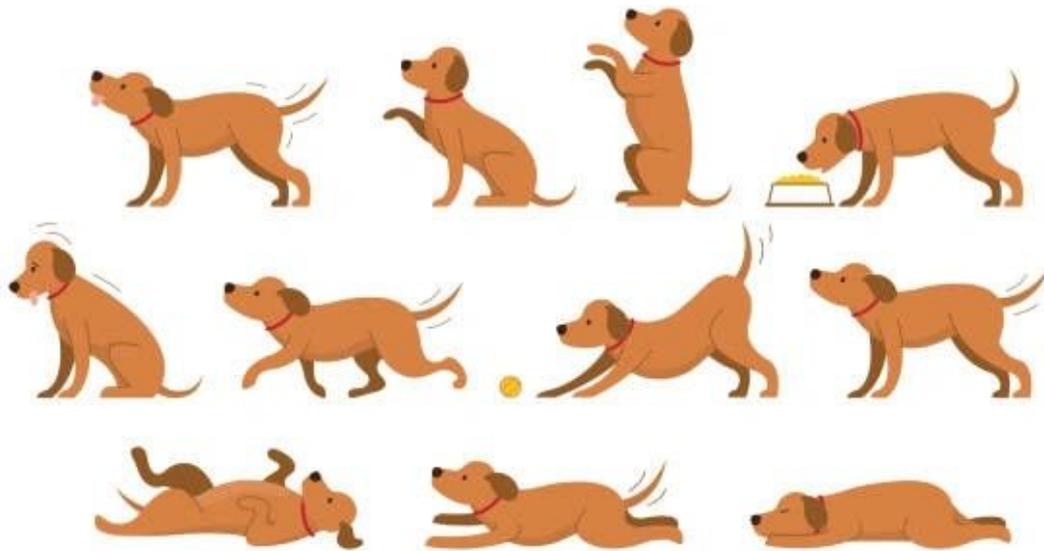
What if they try and play or are still super excited in the cushion/chill zone?

If they are on a cushion or chill zone but won't calm, or they **tunnel or dig with the blanket** you have covered them with (common in small breed hunting mixes) then it's time for them to **go back to their blanket**, bed and/or **safe space** and **invent a command word** for this such as 'enough', or the above 'no thank you'/'you will not' idea, or 'basket', 'blanket' or 'bed'.

And of course cushion/chill zones can be a bed, blanket or basket!

The dog will **show you in their body language where they chill out best**, so you **meet them halfway** wherever practical and if not, try and come up with some other compromise of **play, stop, rest and process.**

Dog Behavior : Eat, Play, Sleep



Yes play can stop for dinner. Just make sure they've had a chill first so they don't get overexcited with the activity immediately followed by a big food stimulus. In our toys blog we talk more about the importance of the hunger hormone and why it's usually best not to mix food and play

And **however long you played for give them at least that long in their bed or favourite snooze place** (if that's your cushion zone like above such as your tummy, don't fuss them just let them lie) **to process** the entire game including any **mini 'cushion' time outs** during the game(s),

A good guide is:

first stage decompression: leave 3 times as long,

second stage: twice as long,

and third stage and beyond: same length of time

is a good guide but one size never fits all dogs.

Dogs will usually let you know when they want to play or stop- you just need to **pick up their signals**. But they do it- both start and stop- because

- they have started to bond with you,
- love you,
- have definitely decided to trust you
- and want to co-operate with you and your pack so they're also trusting that you're learning them as much as they're learning you.

They can't 'talk' as we understand it (though after a while we can make good guesses on what type of bark or growl they are doing) so can only make noise or move their bodies to tell you things.

3. ACTION/ PLAY ZONES

These are the usually **more mobile of the body parts** such as

- hands
- arms
- legs
- feet
- and head/mouth (for emphasis ONLY)



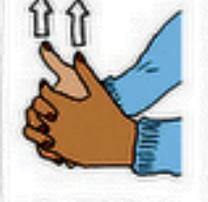
Play running and chasing can be good with more confident dogs in later stages of decompression. See how the body language in the legs especially is mirrored.

You can invent your own ways to use these body parts of course. Once they seem to be **through first stage decompression, play can get more two way** (you can start indirect play with blankets and toys and direct play with your dog more often rather than waiting for the dog to start it every time) and robust (don't rough house though unless you want your dog to play like that all the time with you- once is a treat: twice is a habit!)

But **never ever drag a dog** out of its safe **space** or from **sleep to play!**

While we're not going to assume all our readers have full mobility, you can use the mobility you have to make **obvious and repeated-in-the-same-way play signals** to your dog that you'd like to play, or play back if they've asked. So some suggestions in the Mirroring section above are fine to do for most mobility levels as you do not need to leave your chair to try them. The more nimble of you could transfer these play

actions to the **floor, garden and even on walks** to get their focus back on you and not whatever is (over)stimulating them on the walk.

TORSO	ARMS	HANDS AND FINGERS	FEET AND LEGS
<p>LEARNING AWAY FROM SOMEONE: Means we dislike or disagree with them.</p>  <p>LEARNING TOWARD SOMEONE: Means we like or agree with them.</p> 	<p>FINGERTIPS SPREAD ARMS ON A SURFACE:</p>  <p>A display of confidence and authority.</p>	<p>THUMBS UP:</p>  <p>A good indication of positive thoughts.</p>	<p>ZIGZAGGING/KICKING FOOT:</p>  <p>Indicates discomfort.</p>
<p>SPREADING OUT:</p>  <p>A sign of comfort becomes a territorial or dominance display when there are serious issues being discussed.</p>	<p>ARMS AWAY:</p>  <p>Establishes dominance or communicates there are "issues."</p>	<p>STEEPLING: (SUGGESTIVE TO ASSERTIVE)</p>  <p>A powerful display of confidence.</p>	<p>CROSSING LEGS:</p>  <p>Indicates we are comfortable.</p>
<p>CROSSED ARMS:</p>  <p>Suddenly crossing arms tightly is a sign of discomfort.</p>	<p>ARMS BEHIND THE BACK:</p>  <p>Says "don't disagree" —keeps people at bay.</p>	<p>NECK TOUCHING:</p>  <p>Indicates emotional discomfort, doubt or insecurity.</p>	<p>TOE POINTS UPWARD:</p>  <p>Signals a good mood.</p>

Don't forget, your dog will be learning your body language too!

When they are more confident, they will be happy to play when you are stood up and so much taller than them. But **never start by standing** over them. Also the use of an appendage like the **head (tilting or looking not pointing** in the direction/at the item you are wanting them to focus on), and **simple word cues or arms/hands and legs/feet in combination** makes your communication more obvious to the dog just relying on words or tone.

While tummies in the cushion/chill zone can be soft non threatening safe spaces, encourage them to **chill on your tummy, not play there**, as we have said. What starts out cute becomes a major trial as the dog grows and still thinks they can wage puppy wars ON you!

How do I start to show my new dog the play zones?

1. You could start by **doing nothing at all**. Just exist, **sit there calmly in an open space** and not your usual sofa or chair seat, not looking at the dog. Breathe calmly with no sudden movements. (Maybe read a book or play a phone app game on silent! Anything that is out of the ordinary activity in a different part of the main room you live in, so they have a signal something different and maybe exciting is about to happen.) This often **excites a dog's curiosity** when you are obviously doing something taking all your attention and showing no threatening behaviour- and they haven't been asked to be involved! They may come over right away (kettles) or really start looking at you (lava dogs), maybe even come out of their hidey hole, blanket fort or safe space.

2. **Smelling of food** can help. You could have a strong smelling **high value treat** in your hand or pocket. They always need to **'earn' treats though, don't use them as THE reward for coming to you** without you calling them in first stage decompression, as they'll still be scared. Make the **pay off be some gentle and brief fuss** and **simple chat with YOU** first and foremost. Avoid wearing strong perfumes and try and stick to natural body smell as much as possible so make sure they can smell how 'nice' and 'you' that you smell.

3. Then you could try holding **down by your side a neutral hand** (palm up, by your side) while not looking at the dog, then move the arm away from your body (and away from the chill zones)

4. As they get used to the movements, you could move on

to **slow waves**, 'doggy paddling' with your hands or **tapping the floor or clapping your finger tips together gently**. The fact there is a little **steady movement** is the most important thing. If they are more nervous, you could make your actions more restrained and tap your toe on the floor or your knee with a finger and then the whole hand- something that grabs the attention in a 'this will be fun' way.

5. Combined with training hand signals (blog to come) this is a **great way to bond** with your dog, and the fact that fun stuff and commands can come together create positive associations for the dog which makes training much easier.

6. If they start clawing or mouthing, go back to Mirroring again, and using the advice in the Mirroring section above to stop behaviour you do not want right away in a gentle but consistent way. **Reboot with proper time away if necessary.**

If they are engaging in **direct** (dog + you) or **indirect play** (dog + you+ toy) or (dog+toy) through a blanket, on the human furniture like a sofa and you're ok with that (remember- one is a treat: twice is a habit) then make sure you use your **arm as a 'raised edge' so they don't fall off**, like you would with a human baby. We have seen dogs put all their weight on this arm because they trust their humans so much and while **dogs don't naturally 'hug' as they're not built right for it**, (though often learn how to, and can **see hugs make you happy** they may start). However, dogs have been known to **bite** people who **suddenly hug** them, especially if the person is a **child who's grabbed them before without being told to leave the dog alone**. The gentle arm barrier is much better than a hug to touch the dog without asking too much of them and slowly gets that bond stronger.

If they do **fall off or something unexpected happens during play** that makes them stop play and show shock or other **stress reaction**, like 'new' noise such as a knock at the door or a phone call then

- make a **game** of it if they react well to that tactic like ‘where has the dog gone?’ in happy tones
- or make **no big deal** of it all, ignoring them (unless they are hurt),
- or **distract with an easy task like sit** (sitting down de-stresses a dog usually as it's a **simple task** and it's harder for them to be tense and start to lean forward or lunge when seated because of their muscle structure.)
- or **go back to indirect play with little fuss** and with a selection of toys or through a blanket. If they are still showing play signals after a shock or unexpected event, move back to indirect play anyway if needed or **pause to check on body language**, and maybe give them a small selection of toys to look at and let them choose which toy as the one they choose could give you a clue as to **their state of mind**, so you can see if they think it's a good idea to **continue play or not**.
- If they grab a comfort toy and bring it to you, they are asking for more **indirect contact** instead of you touching them. A gentle pull (but don't take it off them) or fuss of the toy with soft praise works very often with a new dog who does this. Go along with it.
- If they grab a comfort toy and run off, that could be **playtime over** or they want to play with you in their bed even, which again is a huge offering of trust from a dog-inviting you into their space, If you do follow them over there and their ears go back or any other unsure body language then they're not ready for you to get that close just yet, and just hang back, keeping your movements slow and tone low, and go back to doing something ‘unusual’ or interesting, However you can also use that time for playtime to be over for you too and get on with other life stuff.
- If they grab an activity or **interactive toy** and come back over to **engage** you in tug or fetch they're usually fine but watch out for them getting too excited.
- If they go to a puzzle toy and turn their back, they are likely to want **solo play**.

- If they bring a puzzle toy to you, the cycle of play and play back can start again, and you can start to add command words/praising words to **show them it's ok to play** in the way they are asking.
- But if they **don't engage at all, or destroy every toy** in sight, **or** start showing **stress language** like the list above, **disengage and let them process** either in their beds etc or in chill zone on/by the body.

For more on toys, types of toy and why your dog plays with each type of toy (or not!) [check out our toys blog!](#)

FOR DOGS OUT OF FIRST STAGE DECOMPRESSION How do I engage more directly with my dog using body play zones?

Once they are **used to your body language and you theirs**, then play with you directly can begin in earnest, as gentle or as full on as you are comfortable with it being when you play. [But never take them off their feet in play \(pick them up\), or kiss them as a way to start direct play.](#) Save kissing, if you must kiss your dog, for quiet praise time, and start with blowing a kiss from a distance to see if they like it.

Yes **rolling them** can be used as an 'oi, that's a bit much' **like pups or their mum would**, or as gentle play with a dog who's confident with you if they are already lying down and playing at the same time, but it can really scare a new dog. You can also introduce [full body play with over exaggerated almost comedy movements like dogs do](#) at this point- chasing after or running away from your dog as part of play, or hide and seek, once you know them well.

However **never do full body play**

1. during first stage decompression
2. **too soon** again that day if they get overexcited, or get scared because you may have tried it too soon into decompression or processing- go back instead to indirect play

and ignoring, then try again much more gently if they ever show distressed/overexcited body language when you did it

3. **using commands only**, sometimes play can and should be non verbal, spontaneous and done out of love, not hiding the training in play all the time- cues and clues are fine, or questions like 'do you want a...?'

4. never play rough like wrestling unless you want the dog to think it's one of their jobs or use wrestling as one of their play signals. They could end up jumping on someone who doesn't have the strength or experience to play back, or push them off. Or it may **not be playtime but the dog isn't listening** now because you rough housed with them and set no boundaries or rest stops for play.

Not all dogs will cope with full body play even after decompression like this so gauge your dog very carefully should you try it. Much better to try smaller body parts first and see how it goes. But for dogs that like it, it is usually a very **successful 'let's play' shout**

Play Signal	Description	Success Rate (percent)
Chase/run away	<i>Moving quickly towards or away from the dog</i>	100
Vertical bow	<i>A bobbing bow at the waist</i>	100
Lunge	<i>Quick movement toward the dog</i>	100
Signal up	<i>Tap chest or other signal for the dog to jump up</i>	90
Grab paws	<i>Grab or touch dog's paws</i>	77
Play bow	<i>Assume a posture like a dog's play bow (on knees, arms flat on floor)</i>	75
Grab dog	<i>Tugging the dog toward the owner's body</i>	67
Puff	<i>Blow some air from the mouth toward the dog</i>	66
Knee or kick	<i>Person's foot or knee touches the dog</i>	63
Shove dog	<i>Make contact with the dog's body and push it away</i>	62
Whisper	<i>Talk to the dog quietly</i>	56
Play talk	<i>High pitched or other vocalization intended to stimulate the dog</i>	55

Source: SC Psychological Enterprises Ltd

Are you surprised which human body actions have the most effect on dogs in this study?

However if you **combine vocal commands and cues with the actions** like 'come on' or 'play time now' and 'well done' but always say what for (for example) patting your hand with their paw (or you patting their paw, with the 'name + 'touch?' request) without asking during play or bowing etc while you're doing successful full body play, you are likely to get a dog even more likely not only to play with you, but also to start **copying** you when they want to ask for play. Just keep remembering one size does not fit all and **your dog's not 'broken'** if their full body play signals aren't on the chart! These are all **trial and error**, and the play that will work best is the play you both feel comfortable doing.

1. Hands and arms

Not just for throwing toys, balls and sticks, head scratches and belly or butt rubs!

- We often **tap the floor or our knees or chests** at dogs as a sign we want to play. While this can be good as an initial attention-getter, these can **confuse** a kettle dog if you're aiming for **sustained play** (lasts more than a couple of minutes) but are often **non threatening** enough to give a **lava** dog time to know it's ok to come over to you. Actions like this are best to back up with a **verbal command or cue, repeated** till they link the two. **Praise** every time and the occasional treat when they come over: **leave it till next time** if they show **no interest, back off** or seem to be **stressed**.
- We can start by **touching a dogs paws with our hands** (this is a bonding and trust exercise too) and speeding up till quick paw squeeze can be shorthand for play
- We can make our **hands move across the floor** like a crab or insect. It is the **suddenness and speed of the movement** again that makes them react if they do, not your reasoning that it looks like an animal- as to dogs, **it's one of your play zones, not an animal** at all!
- We can use our **arms and hands to make a play grab for a dog we know very well**. Make sure they can see exactly what dog body part you are going for (so don't grab over their heads towards their tail for example) and only try one movement like this at a time till you find one the dog likes best as a starting cue that it's playtime. **They do not see like we do, in colour, angle or perspective**, so avoid grabbing too close too fast or around the face and neck. For more on exactly how dogs see compared to us, [check out our toys blog](#).
- We can **pull the dog towards us in play** too, or **playfully shove them away** with our hands and arms. You can start

these actions in the main living space then in a **wider and larger space within the home**, **extend** to the garden, then to play well in other people's houses, on **walks and holidays** and it can even be used after a day or so to get them used to moving house as long as they seem to be decompressing ok.

The more you speed up or exaggerate any movement of course, the more likely a dog is to react.

Discourage any nipping or mouthing of play zones- the hands and arms, feet and legs, and head area in all phases of play with going to back to indirect play, keep an eye out for **wetting in excitement or submission** or **pushing other dogs and humans out of the way** to get to you while playing (getting possessive) by backing off and letting them calm and process if they're overexcited too fast. Go back to the calming methods in the Mirroring section of the blog to reinforce the dog + you, dog + toy and dog+ you+ toy relationships.

And we can also use **hands and arms to help enclose a chill zone**. If a dog starts playing with your play zones while sitting or lying in the chill zone, they are confused as to how you are using those body parts in this situation. So go back to the methods above in the Chill Zone section of this blog (brief hugs, slower and slower strokes, and so on, or even disengaging 'nibble mode' by bringing a comfort toy into the chill zone or safe space but not playing with the toy, just lying it by the dog.)

2. Legs and feet

Not just for walking your dog! _

- **Chasing and running away from your dog** must **only** be done when you want them to **play**. Never do this on open walks to play or in an attempt to get them to **recall** back to you else they'll get overexerted, or stressed, and run away further, or chase you hard and get too enthusiastic when they catch you! Only do this in very specific areas indoors like down the hallway and make sure they have very obvious escape routes to and away from you. Or if you are outdoors only in a controlled area like a hired dog field, but here there must be no obvious escape routes. Make sure **you are the one to start this kind of play and not the dog** else they can get too **intense** about the running fast part and may start to overguard you or the home.

If **outside** where using body chill zones isn't practical for rest sessions, you could move back to **indirect play** if they like to **chase or run** as well, for a **good energy burner** and a break from **super exciting direct engagement with you**, such as a **ball 'flingy'** or if they're not likely to try and eat it, a moving or mechanised toy. Something perhaps safer is a laser pointer, or for the more active of us, choosing a 'finish line' like two trees and encouraging the dog to follow you closely (at heel or just behind or just ahead of you) towards that fixed point first onlead and then offlead, directing their energy into **controlled but longer distance running** with you, like fell running together or running alongside a bike. You can adapt this to a slower pace on good ground for wheelchair users.

- **bowing from the waist**. Think a full on King of France bow or theatrical bow



complete with a little jump or flourish and spreading your **arms wide** and **palms down** so the dog can see your hands hold nothing scary, or show them you have a treat in your hands to get their focus. Make the **movement fast and dynamic**, and **not like your normal** movements, to really get their attention!

- ‘going down to doggy level’ bowing on the floor



[Have you tried this? How did your dog react?](#)

is likely to get an even more **vigorous play response back from your dog** as all mammals do that gesture. If you can, don't just ease to the ground unless you're introducing a new dog to it, try and jump down like they would. Too slow and careful a movement and they won't recognise the 'play with me?' request. You can kneel and lay your arms on the floor, elbows to hands flat on the ground, feet tucked under your legs.

- **tapping toes and wiggling feet** and toes like doggy paddle but with the feet can be a low impact way to start direct play with your dog as **they learn a lot from you from 'high smell'** with oils and sweat areas like feet (and armpits or genital areas!) but beware they might not move on to play as you expected and **start licking your feet (too much) or fixate on your socks** shoes and slippers for toys instead and start to eat them if left lying around. So it's best to keep the foot tap or wiggle as a way of just getting their attention and moving on to more universal ways of showing it's play time as soon as possible.

3. Head and mouth _

Discourage direct contact with your head and mouth.

This body part is for directing play, not for being pawed at, licked, pulled or pushed at, and for sometimes (never every time) using play to make basic training more fun!

Licking.

If you don't want a dog to lick your face, or play or chill zones- **never allow it in play.** However licking is a way dogs can **show affection that is often learned** or **find out more about you** or even because they're **stressed and they're appeasing you** so you don't shout or hurt them, but are asking

you to **back off out of their space** (yes, even if they are the ones that came over into your space!) so if they do it and you don't want that, or it's at an inappropriate time (e.g. while driving!) then it's **best not to let that habit form** in the first place. **Reboot** back to a cushion/chill zone or their safe space if they seem overwhelmed at any time during body play zone activity like this. Or encourage **more dog like expressions of love and play** such as **resting a head or paw on you, leaning against you** or making **extended eye contact** (this only applies to dogs you know well. Eye contact with unknown dogs is not advised.).

Whispering (and other vocal tones)

Instead of raising your voice to show **excitement, whispering can be really good to hook the dog in and focus on you**, playing on their natural **curiosity** and **need to belong**. **Dogs like to be talked to**, and **narrating your day to them is another good way to generally bond** too but to **get into play mode? Go quiet**. Use a **high tone or pitch but volume as low** as possible.

The types of talking to your dog can divided into five levels:

1. **Happy** (high volume, high pitch)
2. **Disappointed** (low volume, low pitch)
3. **Soft and reassuring** (low volume, high pitch)
4. **Firm** (low volume and low pitch)
5. and **Caution!** – (high volume and high or low pitch) to warn of danger.

Whispering softly and/or firmly lets your dog know they are **safe**, and that it could be **playtime** or something else **fun**. Have some **cue phrases or questions** like 'time for play play?' 'want to high five?' or 'what you doing?' or an **exclamation** like 'I'm coming to get you!' or 'there you are!' when they start to show play signals in response.

Eye Contact.

Of course the **eyes are not a play zone** but for a dog they are a window to what you are asking them. Eye contact is super important in human communication and relationships so we also make eye contact with dogs 'by nature'. [According to new research by Hungarian ethologists](#), at least four characteristics affect dogs' ability to establish eye contact with humans.

- Short-headed, (as they can see straight ahead to get eye contact better than dogs with longer noses)
- cooperative,
- young
- and playful dogs are the most likely to look into the human eye.



Some trainers advocate treat training to get a dog to have eye contact with you. This is a human centred approach as you're trying to get the dog to do something most of them simply don't have the right skull shape to do! They will be forced to tilt their heads if you don't know the focal point of your dog's eyes (show play language) whether they want to or not.

Dogs have adapted like no other species to live with humans, and communication plays a vital role. They are **sensitive to the direction of the human's gaze**, which helps them decide whether a message is directed to them. **Forming eye contact with the owner raises oxytocin levels in both parties**, and we've already said how important this hormone is in this blog and the [toys blog](#)- and here it plays a role in **developing social**

bonding.

However, not all dogs can make eye contact well and it's **nothing to do with how much they love you or are obeying you.**

- the anatomy of the eye, and nose length getting in the way of looking at you
- the original function of the breed or breed mix (ratting, hunting,
- age or vision impairment
- and having a more reticent or shy personality have a lot to do with it.

Blowing at your dog.

Not all behaviourists and our adopters agree on this one, some say it's a good 'human wants to play' signal as it can surprise the dog into focusing on you but many more others say dogs don't like it. Unlike when dogs get the wind in their face on a car trip, to **blow on a dog you need to get close to their face or other sensitive body area** to do it, or seem like you're staring at them, and as it's **something dogs can't do to each other**, might just shock the dog too much. Your breath won't smell the same as the air rushing past them in the car either. As a result they could either **lick you** back (gentle/submissive/appeasing reaction), or **play/neutral nibble you** (confident/puppy reaction), or **snap** at you (fear/previous abuse reaction). So **don't try this one** unless you

1. know your dog very well,
2. know they are very confident and bonded with you,
3. know they haven't reacted negatively to all the other play signals you've tried first
4. start super gentle at first
5. stay away from their faces and blow from at least 30cm (12 inches) away

Kissing (in the air or on the dog's head or body).

As can be seen in the chart above, **kissing** can generally **not be understood as a play or engagement signal** from you to your dog. It can even have the same effect as blowing, and is likely only to get a positive response from a dog that's already confident with you and bonding to you. Doing it fast or in the air with a 'mwah' or similar noise can work but, like with other play gestures, the speed of the movement is actually more important to grab the attention and show intent to play than the end movement, for a dog. For a human, the blow or kiss is the emotional payoff, but not for the dog. They can't kiss us as their mouths don't work that way, and the closest they get is licking, which is not, as most used to think, just your dog 'kissing' you, and we've gone into some reasons for it in this blog. But here **licking could mean 'you're too close' or being submissive** to touch that's making them **uncomfortable** as well as an excited play lick. So it's best to use the same precautions with kissing as blowing. And for health and hygiene reasons definitely avoid kissing round their nose and mouth, especially if your general health is not good.

Tilting your head.

This is best **used in combination with making other clear and positive play gestures** listed above. Dogs can hear a wider spectrum of sound than us but location of that sound is not as accurate. Perking their ears up and/or tilting their heads helps them

- **locate the noises** more quickly,
- **interpret the tone** of our voices,
- **pick out word cues or phrases** and who's saying them;
- and also to have a **better view** of our facial expressions

to check our body language. So when you do it to them you showing **you're paying attention to them**. This is a form of **Mirroring**.

Deliberately staring at something/focusing past the dog.

Often far more useful to a dog than direct eye contact, so they can better guess your intent is **not to point** but to **look intently** and be **poised as still as you can** at something, introducing the engagement with an obvious head movement towards the object of focus. **Back** this movement up with **widened eyes, and/or a smile with teeth**. Or you could **shade your eyes** with your hand as the dog may follow your hand movement. They will **copy you** and/or get **curious** and turn to see what you're looking at. You can see more clearly further away than most dogs so start with items from about 1m away then work on more distant items. This can help with recall too as you pretend to 'look' for them, with all these gestures, in play.

For more on how dogs see distance, try reading our [toys blog](#). We have seen that this could be [affected by breed mix](#) of dog/shape of the skull and eye position, as they will need to **head tilt** or find **another vantage point** (so may get on the windowsill or sofa) to see what you see the longer their nose is.

So you both focusing on a third object, person or other dog (where you and the dog are the two main 'objects') can help you **meet in the middle with training communication and play.**

This is why dogs often do better with

- playing with a toy first before they play with you directly
- meeting a new person or dog on neutral ground like a garden or walk.

It is a **literal middle ground**, and a bridge between old and new activity, and the more we come to the middle for our dogs and see **why they do what they do**, rather than just thinking along human lines, the better the relationship with our dogs will

be.

Play or 'baby' talk

Get those mouths moving!



We've already said that **narrating your day to your dog** is a good way for them to bond. This is because they learn sounds and tones to help them work out their world and the more they understand, usually the less stressed they are. And it works because dogs can't talk like humans, and we can't talk like dogs, so you need to **meet in the middle** to understand each other.

It may help feel less silly doing it if you stop thinking of it as 'baby talk' and call it 'dog-directed speech' instead,

using **exaggerated intonation** and **simple two or three part phrases** when talking about dog-relevant subjects, like **play, toys, treats and walks**. This has the added bonus of when you're talking 'normally', they know you're not trying to engage them and will sleep in peace or be less likely to monopolise the room when you're chatting with visitors or family! We also talked about the

five types of vocal tone,

which also gives your dogs vital clues on how to react.

However, the words and phrases themselves you use can make all the difference in the world, and we've shown you some

word and phrase combinations that work because they are simple, instructional and repetitive.

You can of course, and should, invent your own, see what words and tones the dog likes best. This can be especially useful

- for **security** on walks and other activities out of the home as nobody else will be using your dogs command and play words
- but also when you're trying to tell a dog off or tell them something important but you **don't want to scare** them.

A more babyish voice or phrase clearly said like 'What you do?' (take out any unnecessary words where you can) **starting low pitch and ending high** (as that goes though all the tones) can **pull them out of a stress reaction** (like sudden barking,



or running away) and get them to engage because they want to, not because you're forcing it. It contains **three very simple and three very different sounds**. You can try the emphasis on different words and see if that works better too:

'**What** you do?' (start with high pitch and end low, say the first word loudly- you are asking if they're busy and if not, would they like to play)

'What **you** do?' (Say with word you higher (but keep the whole phrase happy and light) and a little louder- this sounds like you are curious about them, and they may want to play or have fuss in response.)

'What you **do**?' (Start low pitch, and end high, slowly getting louder without yelling. This can be a gentle type of telling off

especially if you really focus on the object they damaged, for example- do not point- so they know what you're on about. **Taking them to the item** (like rubbing their faces in a wee! Why do people do that) is a **bad idea** as they **can't see** what you're showing them! It's right in their blind spot under their nose! So use tone instead.

A phrase like 'you will not!' is also three very simple and very different sounds they can safely cue from and with a **firm** vocal tone (low volume, low pitch), gets the point across that they **need to pay attention right now** without you having to yell. You could play around with pitch and volume with your dog till it seems you have hit on the right combination of sounds. It doesn't even need to make sense!

You could use **any three sounds** combo like 'hat way though' or 'by see they' for example- any sounds that make your **mouth move differently each time** to say them till you can see they are starting to react to the words as well as the sounds, as they learn English. Or if they like the 'nonsense baby sounds' as commands keep them- but make sure they always mean the same command. Keep it simple, and if it works repeat it till they 'naturally' **react the way you want when you say it. If they're not, you need new words!**

This is not the same as 'babying' a dog, like dress up and carrying the poor thing in a handbag all day- this is a **two way social interaction and co-operation** that they will understand, for as we saw in the [toy blog](#), dogs are basically very bright toddlers. And like with a toddler, how you treat them at the start can either lay a great foundation or issues down the road for you and your dog.

Plus while sometimes NO is or should be a complete sentence for humans, for dogs they always need context.

Don't always start play right away though check their body language first. If they seem a bit stressed just some gentle

engagement like a brief fuss or see if they want a toy might be better, even more so when your dog is new and learning. And of course, you should absolutely see which words and sounds your dog likes before you land a name on them just because you like the name...

So why am I doing all this?

(Adapted from [‘Companion Animal Psychology’](#) by Zazie Todd, PhD)

Basically, you’re not a dog, but this dog is now living in your house and dogs still need to learn certain skills they usually learn from their families and environments to function well physically and mentally, just like any other mammal.

1. To help keep their movements natural, and appropriate with consistent boundaries.

Play helps puppies learn **motor skills** and naturally trains them to have **positive play muscle memory**. That means they’d automatically repeat the same natural/ learned reaction when encountering the same situation, as their muscles would react in the same way that has been reinforced by repetition in play. If we watch dogs play, they chase and run away, roll on the floor in play fighting, mount, pat or paw, pick up objects with their mouth and tug, bite or shake them and much more as we have seen before. This **mimics and practices real life interactions** with dogs they will meet in the future, and can also be called socialisation.

Puppies and newly socialising adult dogs learn **how hard they can nip** their buddies (called Acquired or Proper Bite Inhibition), and to **play bow** if they want to **continue playing** for longer.

Through play they are learning real skills they would learn with their family or in the wild vital to know:

- how to move their bodies in ways that are **acceptable** to their pack,
- make sure they get **food**,
- and **defend themselves** in (play) fights.

Dog Play

Normal Dog Play consists of:
Play fighting, play fleeing, play chasing & play mounting

Signs of good play:




Play-face



Play bow



**Bouncy, exaggerated movement:
Rocking horse gait**

Activity shifts:
Chasing with play fighting breaks

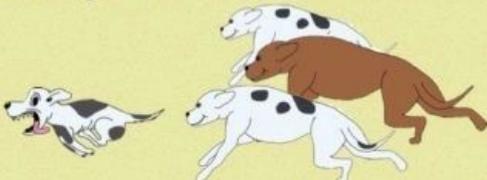


Role reversals:
Chaser/chasee
On top/on bottom
Biting/being bitten

Self handicapping: Eg. biting with minimal force - a large dog allows a small dog to knock him over

CAUTION Closely monitor:
Big on small dog play

Be ready to interrupt:
Chase with flat "real" running, not bouncy
2 or more dogs chasing one dog
Chase games with no breaks



STOP Do not allow

Big on small chase games
This can be extremely dangerous



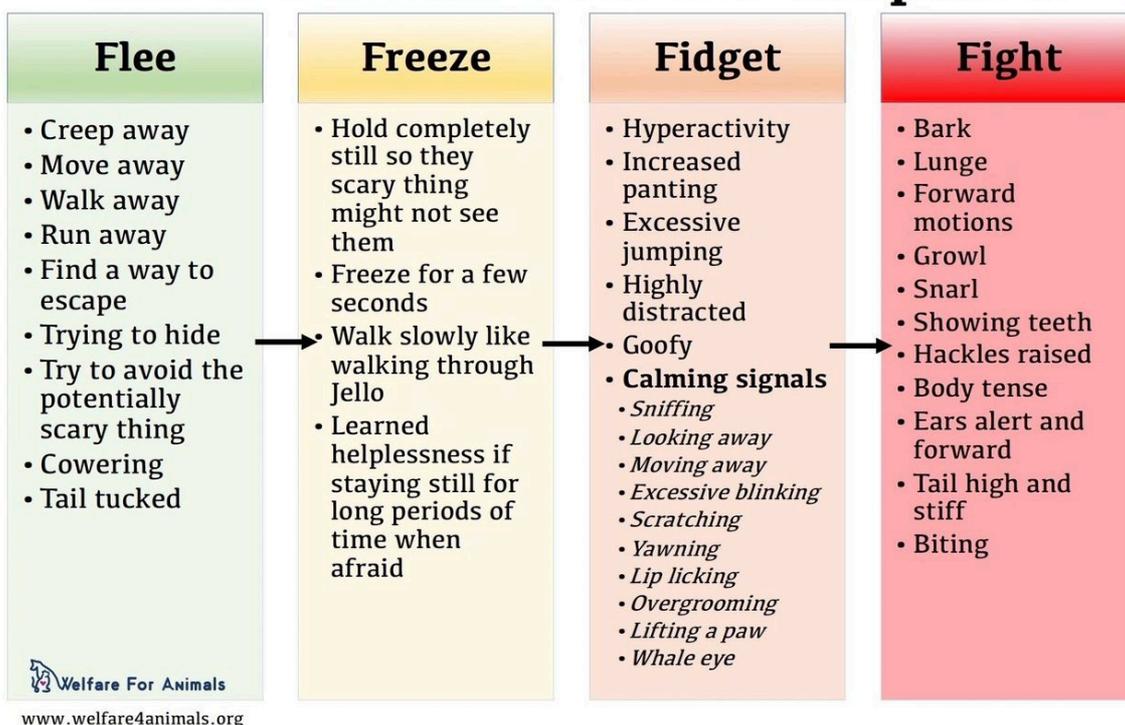


Yaletown Dog
Training

So you're **tapping into their instincts** and using them to help your dog show body language and engagement in a consistent, positive and healthy way as 'second nature'.

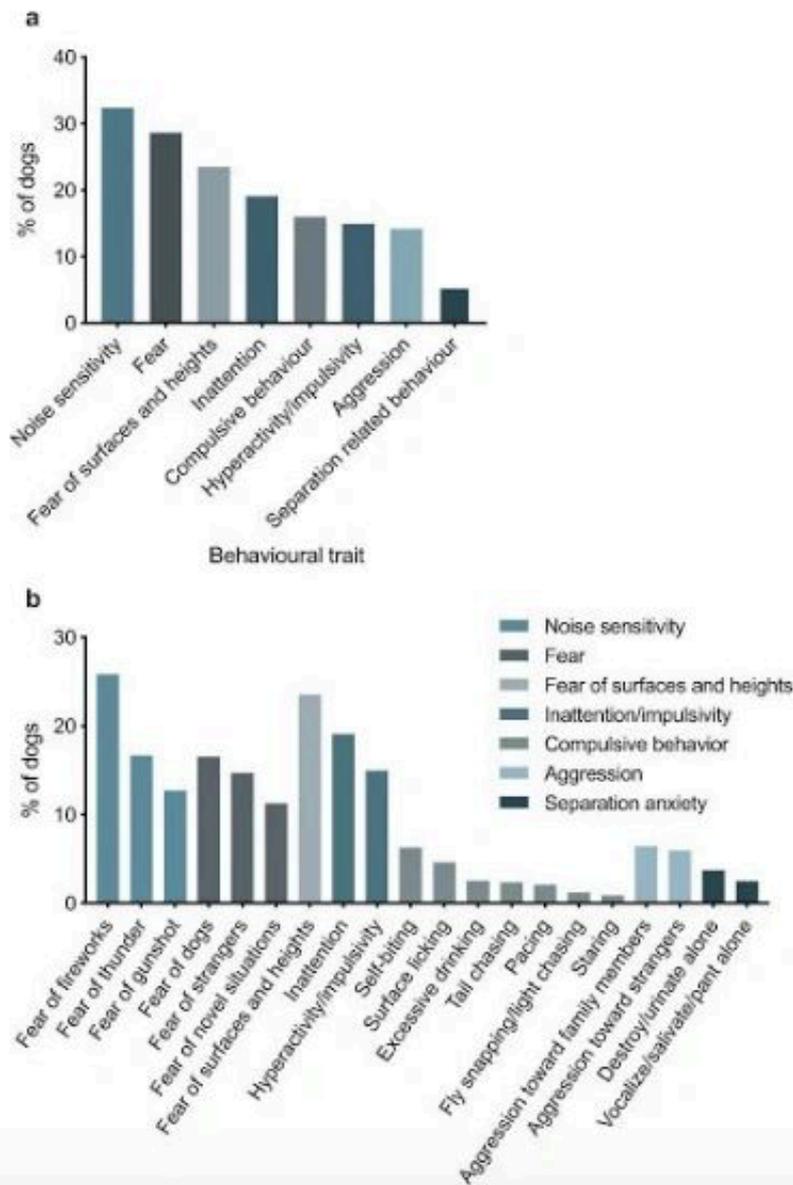
2. To give them **more options than just fight or flight.**

The 4F's of Fear- Four Fear Responses



Play is training for the unexpected: when they play dogs find out how to right their bodies quickly and safely when knocked off balance and **how to cope** when something surprising startles them (they may also resort to barking if startled). Numerous studies have shown that a high percentage of dogs show anxious symptoms due to fear responses, with noise sensitivity being the biggest issue closely followed by **fear**

(bonding).



So **brain chemistry and hormone level changes** during play would therefore help dogs learn **how to cope with real-life stressors**.

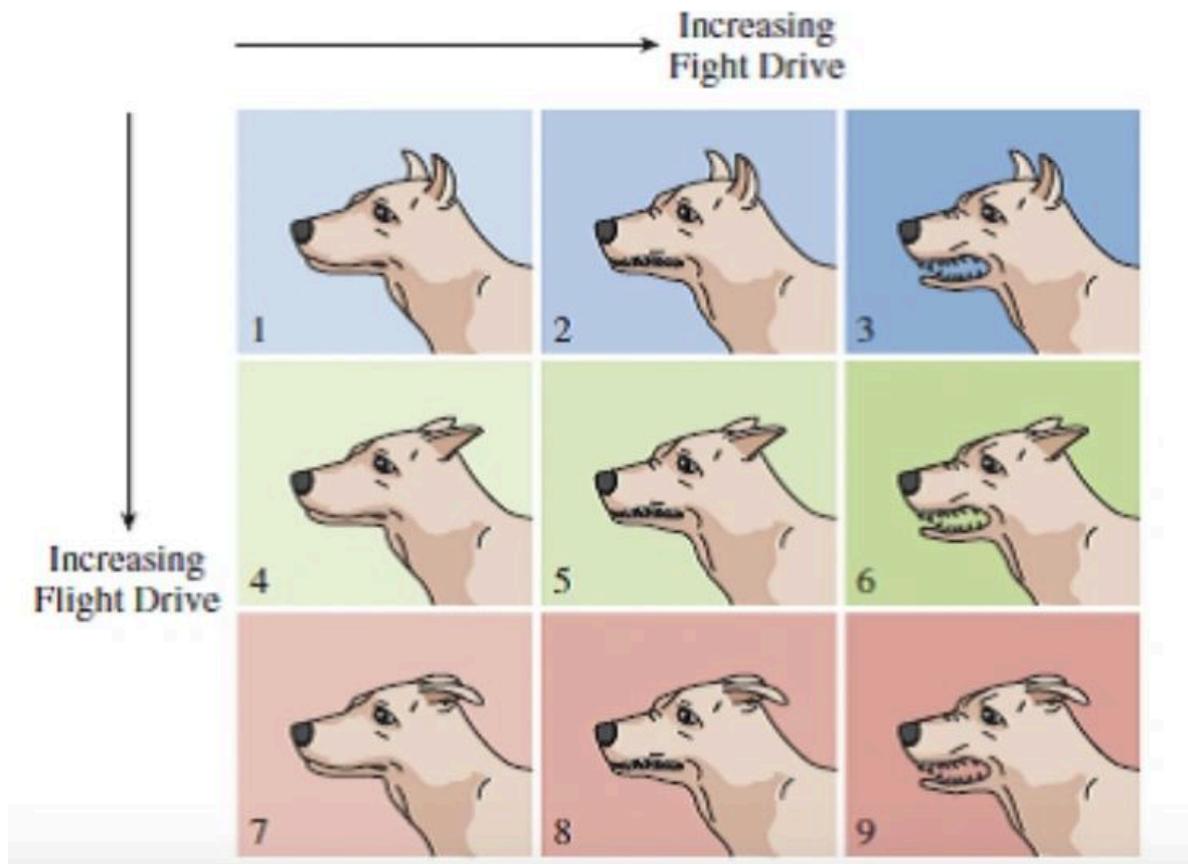
This could explain the fact that dogs **like new toys** but are **cautious of new methods of play** or amended methods of play with no 'notice', or being **played with by new people** without a gentle introduction to the new thing or person at their pace. **A toy as indirect play**

- **feels safer,**
- will always **react in the same way** when played with,
- and they've had toys before, so **know what to do.**

This is not only during decompression but all their lives.

Some **caution in a dog is natural and sensible** to have as long as it doesn't spiral into anxiety or fear behaviours (flight or flight, destruction, high volume complaining or disobedience). It also explains the way dogs **self-handicap during play** and put themselves at a disadvantage such as lying down or belly showing; this can be seen as **practising behaviour** they may need later on as a way to **defuse real aggression**. So having play based options as reactions to choose from, rather than just fleeing or snapping, is much **better for the dog's mental health**.

'Aggression' is a lot lower than most people think, and it's not the same as human aggression. In **dogs it's always masking fear of something**. But the key to checking for 'aggression' is in the facial muscles most noticeably to us humans despite the fact they are usually screaming at us with their entire bodies that they need help.



In a new dog these facial signs might be missed or misinterpreted. Or if they never really stop showing the more distressed faces, then 'stress face' is the default and you'll start to think that's their normal face. IT ISN'T. You may sense something's not quite right and bring in a professional like a vet, behaviourist or trainer. The rescue will also offer experience based advice live online and have rules and recommendations in general and tailored to what they know of your dog from their time in rescue for appropriate engagement.

3. Bonding the family unit.

Play promotes social bonding between dogs, other dogs if not a solo dog in the home, and their humans. Play helps dogs cooperate as a group rather than building any power base or hierarchies, so is about **building social relationships**.

Dogs **prefer to play with people they know**, and they are more likely to approach the winner of a game as that means that person knows what to do; they can **trust and predict** that person's **cues, play gestures and rules** they set.

But when they win a game against a person it does not lead to

increased attempts at '**dominance**' over the human unless they also start **disrespecting your personal bubbles and playing up** (pushing for play and attention when they know it's not 'time' and misbehaving when they don't get their own way) or out of character. If a dog gets **overexcited and mounts**



another dog during play this has gone over into either **dominance** (if the one dog appears to be **bullying and the other appears scared**) or the dogs can **smell an infection** like an UTI on the other dog, or something more serious such as the hormonal changes that take place with a neurological or mental disorder, seizures, or something like cancer, and they're pointing it out in an 'inappropriate' way because they don't know how else to tell you. They may also lick the affected body part or area. or it can be social anxiety. In any of these cases the supervising humans can **gently defuse** it with any of the methods already said above.

So play is only happening when it's about **building cooperative relationships**, not social rank.

If not, it could be or become problematic behaviour you will need to resolve.

BUT MOST IMPORTANTLY OF ALL! _ **4. Play must be positive and easily calmed.**

When play seems **out of control** in timing or intensity and does not improve or level out in general as the dog decompresses it is just a **side-effect of other processes**, such as

- having too much energy, (being a puppy, not being walked yet as they've just arrived)
- coming from a deprived environment that did not provide stimulation
- in more rare cases, an indication that something neurological is wrong,
- or they have been beaten or injured in some way in the past.

They may have **learned** to '**explode**' into or be '**unable to stop**' such behaviour because of **poor environments** in their past or present:

- **limited activity** or small runs with nothing to play with whilst in rescue kennels or in their new home



Stuck in a kennel all day with no play or run times does nothing for a dog's physical or mental health. This is why our motto is 'no kennels, no cages, no chains' for all fostered and adopted dogs.

- being **left alone too long** every day while their adopters are away or at work without suitable diversions and interactions so they are overexcited when they return and won't calm easily/for some time, or they've come home to destruction. Playing with a dog, especially rough housing when they're already this excited is not a good idea.
- some kind of **damage or abuse**
- **neurological issues** (genetic, injury or developed due to neglect in not treating a dog for diseases like parvo, distemper, heartworm, brucellosis or babesiosis but appear to **recover with no aid**, or they were **not symptomatic** so **nobody knew** they had caught a virus or developed a condition till neurological behaviours started) in their life before rescue.

Any lack of provision in the forever home, foster or rescue is not usually intentional. It is often the result of

- **not being up to date** on how **dogs' needs** are far more complex than what people thought they were when having a dog as a kid or even 5 or so years ago so their '**natural**'

knowledge about dogs isn't as useful as it could be. Now we know you can't just leave a dog for more than 4 or 5 hours with no safe toys, long chew treats, background sounds or other aids, or a visit from a human, without them getting stressed in some way.

- **unrealistic expectations**, complacency, misunderstanding or not having the time or the empathy to fully 'get' the dog's body language while learning the dog on arrival. The dog maybe have **decompressed more slowly than 'expected'** when in reality there is no actual timeframe to decompression- it is very individual to each dog.

And there's **never a 100% guarantee any human** can just '**read**' any dog- you need to **train yourself!**

This is why we write all our blogs and insist our adopters read and absorb them.

As the problem that may occur are **never the dog's fault**, and must be fixed by the adopting humans. The blogs help provide the some of the tools needed to help the dogs.

Due to these and other factors, this results in **accidentally repeating actions the dogs experienced before being rescued** and this can slow or stop decompression, or create negative behaviours. **Mistakes can happen** when learning your dog and **they will forgive you** and move past the experience providing

- you keep to decompression rules
- they have safe spaces, and processing time
- clearly shown house rules for them to follow,
- and consistent affection without overwhelming them.

And **neurological issues are very hard to detect** even by a

veterinarian as they cross over into so many other conditions and behaviours, and also **start off looking like normal, if a little intense, play.**

However, it is well known that **poor environments and neurological issues are both linked to the development of 'stereotypies'** (actions they 'can't help') and it's super hard to which one (or both!) is causing the issues.

Both display repetitive but not always connected or logical or predictable behaviours, rather than play although it resembles play at first.

Something about their playing and their body language **won't add up** at first, then they can **escalate** or develop **compulsive disorders** where 'normal' **happy dog behaviours become stress created** or based, and then **deteriorate to desperately repeated or suddenly sped up or slowed down actions-**

- circling,
- pacing,
- whirling,
- jumping,
- wall bouncing,
- (over)grooming or
- chewing themselves become repetitive and obsessive and
- wall staring
- or 'zoning out'
- or short term memory loss,
- and constant high alert
- snapping and biting with **no stress behaviour build up** become the norm unless very **firm and consistent instruction and training based play** is provided from the first by the human between the new dog and any resident dogs too.

Often dogs that do this are seen as 'aggressive' when in fact **they're scared and overwhelmed, or have no social training**. Or, as we have talked about here, the less likely option of it being some kind of **medical problem**.

Luckily, if it is an **energy build up** due to **lack of play or exercise** in kennels or yet in the new home due to decompression can be usually be dissipated by introducing not just **controlled direct play and 'jobs' with lots of rest breaks and processing** time but also (though not all at the same time!)

- **walks** with phases of 'free sniffing' and controlled tasks like heeling (no treat), training leads, fetch and recall
- **day trips** to play parks
- new **tasks and jobs** around the house and garden (can also be disguised as play)
- new indoor **places** like other's houses to friends and family, who may also who have new dogs to meet
- or **new visitors** both human and dog to **learn play** with.

This can **be hard with a decompressing dog**. They may not be harness, lead, walk or car ready yet. So it's even more important once decompression is obviously going well to **regularly stimulate and sustain direct play** with your dog until they can go further afield.

The consistent repetition is as important as the **engagement** as you need to retrain and refocus muscle and mental memories.

And to ensure the learning they do isn't fuelled by stress, a daily dose of a recommended [herbal relaxant](#) is also advised especially:

- all through **decompression**
- at **noisy times of year** like Bonfire Night, Diwali, New Year and Chinese New Year,
- or when going in the **car to new places/seeing new people.**

It will help play stay lower key and friendly while they are learning how to play in your home.

However if **play was only linked to too much energy or a bad previous environment, abuse, or neurological problems,** then **playfulness wouldn't be a consistent trait in dogs** that is usually **displayed in a very positive way with little adjustment** needed by the resident human(s).



This face is usually a sign you're doing it right (provided you're ok with them being on your lap!).

And finally... we did this to them!

And we also need remember that because **play is something humans like**, dogs with this tendency get adopted first and if from a breeder, **selected for in domestication from wolves in the first place** because of more playful and friendly tendencies, or have arisen as a **result of breeding** for other traits, such as **exaggeratedly** 'cute' and small features, with **dependent** natures to match.

So we have **bred dogs to want to play with us** far more than they might in the wild.

They need engagement with us, and their **mental health will suffer** if they don't get it.

And sometimes, if they had **negative care or injury** when young, develop **mixed messages** and even occasionally have **mental health and physical conditions** that become apparent when they play that can upset other dogs who can't understand them so may need a **reset and some extra**

patience and TLC from you.

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