

He's Only Playing!



By Sarah Whitehead

**Meeting, greeting and play between dogs
What's OK, what's not**



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Sarah is an international lecturer, author of more than 25 books, booklets and DVDs, and is a frequent media contributor, appearing on TV, radio and the internet. She has helped thousands of dogs (and cats) to overcome behaviour and training problems and is Managing Director of Think Dog! Ltd – an organisation offering accredited and practical education courses in training and behaviour.

Sarah lives in Windsor, Berkshire, UK and has four wonderful dogs of her own – three gorgeous crossbreeds from rescue, and an awesome Kooikerhondje called Quill.

For information on Sarah's educational courses, please visit www.thinkdog.org
For her online programme on canine body language: www.learntotalkdog.com

He's Only Playing!

Meeting, greeting and play between dogs What's OK, what's not

"He's only playing."

As a canine behaviourist, this is possibly my **least** favourite expression in the world...

Of course, many dogs love to play with other dogs, but with an estimated 64,000 dogs being killed or injured by other dogs in the UK in one year*, it's clearly not without risk.

Good canine play is balanced. Both dogs get to have fun and enjoy themselves without feeling threatened or bullied at any point. Play can change quickly from happy and relaxed to frightening or even damaging, so it is essential that we monitor our dogs' play, and intervene where necessary.

It's simply not true that dogs should be allowed to 'sort it out themselves'. Even if neither of the dogs are physically harmed, the emotional effects of a bad experience can last forever and can create serious behavioural problems that could have been avoided.

Good play, on the other hand, can be fun, stimulating and enjoyable for both parties – it can also create and maintain bonds between dogs that remain friends for life.

*Figures from Direct Line, based on survey of owners and vets who had treated dogs injured by other unknown dogs in the UK in 2017.



Learn To Talk Dog!

Reading and responding to canine play signals is not always straightforward, even for professionals!

This is because:

1 It's fast! Often faster than the human eye or brain can follow. This means that behavioural (and even physical) damage can be done before we have realised and stepped in to interrupt it. So, the message here is, interrupt sooner rather than later. (Even if that makes you look like an over-protective parent!)



2 It's tricky to interpret. Is it play, or is it tipping over into aggression? The difficulties of translation are not just because we are a different species, but because many play gestures are actually modified 'fighting' behaviours. This means we always have to focus on the context. No wonder it's hard for us to tell the difference.

3 It's different every time. Even once you understand the main signals that dogs use in play, every single interaction with every new dog will be a little bit different, and that means you always need to be watchful and prepared to take action if necessary. We want our dogs to enjoy the company of other dogs, but under our care.



What's good?

• Relaxed, soft body language



In this picture, you can see that this lovely dog approaches with her face and body at a slight angle. Her lips are pulled back – almost like a smile, and her eyes are soft. Her ears are back but you can see the insides of them (nearly always a sign of friendliness).

Her body looks soft and 'wiggly' rather than stiff and tense.

- Ears back, and the insides are showing
- Soft eye contact
- Corners of the lips (the commissure) are pulled back into a slight 'smile'

• Non-direct approaches

(Dog stops to sniff, or moves in gently, slightly to the side, or waits to approach)

• Dog's head is turned away, saying 'no permission' to approach further

• The other dog responds appropriately, keeping his body side-on and staying at the same distance away

• Low, gentle tail wags say, "I'm friendly, I'm no threat."



- **Dogs stand or move parallel to each other**

Rather than head-on

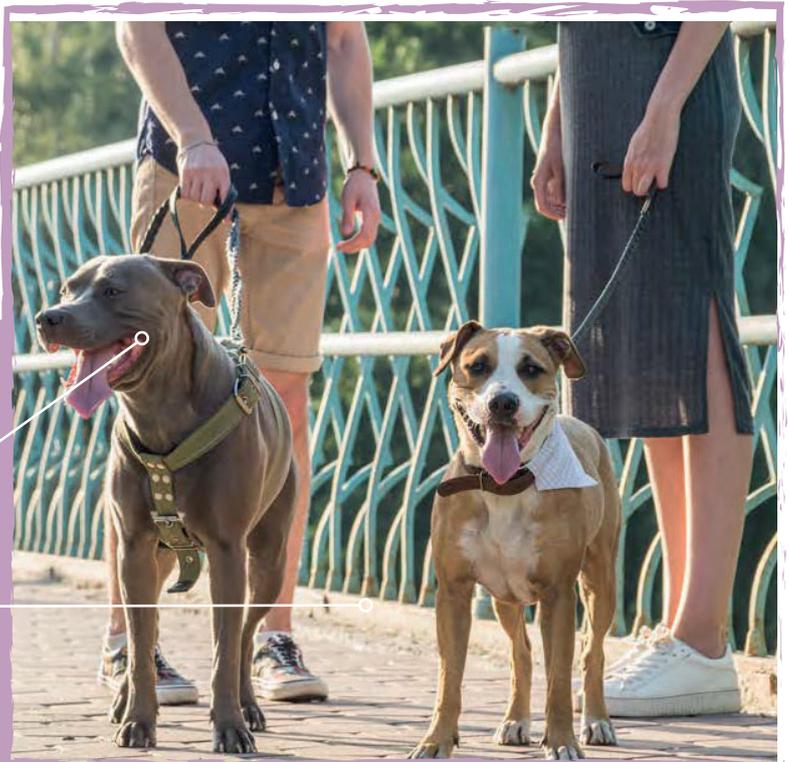
- **No unwelcome body contact**

(Or no body contact at all)

- Relaxed facial muscles

- Dog turns his face away slightly

- There is comfortable space between the dogs



- **Mirroring**

The dogs copy each other

- Even though these dogs are moving incredibly fast, they do not make body contact

- The dogs reflect each other's speed, movements and energy

- **Matching** – the dogs match each other (eg, one stops to sniff and the other does the same)

- Sniffing together is a lovely, non-confrontational, calm shared behaviour

- It's almost as if the adult dog is teaching the puppy what to do in this social situation



- **Self-handicapping**

(eg, one dog might hold a toy in its mouth, or might lie down if it is much bigger than the other)



- Here, the smaller dog is clearly exerting more effort - but the larger dog allows it

- Ears back, and the insides are showing

- Soft, squinty eye contact. This isn't about who wins! It's all about the fun of the game

• **Using toys to play**

- Using toys allows contact without the dogs actually touching each other
- Holding a toy or object clearly shows that the teeth are otherwise occupied!
- Play can be exciting, but body language stays relaxed



• **Natural pauses**

Taking a breather from play (often one dog will stop and shake and the other waits for them to resume or do something different, such as sniff.)



- The dogs take a natural break from play for a few seconds
- Their body language mirrors each other - even the height of their tails is the same
- Mouths are open, facial muscles are relaxed and 'smiley'

Tail wagging

Tail wagging means happiness and friendliness, right? Well, possibly not!

It turns out that this is only part of the story, some of the time.



- Tail is high and wags in short, fast movements. This disseminates a lot of scent information

- Dog leans into the other dog's space

- The Chihuahua's tail is held down to cover and conceal the area where scent is strongest

As a behaviourist who specialises in aggression in dogs, I can tell you that not all wagging means the dog is feeling content or friendly. Many people who are bitten by their own dogs tell me (with bewilderment) that their dog was wagging its tail while it was being aggressive – but on further questioning, I find out that the position and movement of the dog's tail couldn't be more different from the relaxed and happy stance of the dog when it's friendly.

For example, a tail held down, or even between the legs that gives fast, low wags tends to be an expression of uncertainty, while a tail held high and rigid shows more determination and possible threat.

I think that tail wags in dogs are the equivalent of a human smile. Some are genuine and mean, "Hello, nice to meet you," while others are... well, not so much. It's all about looking at the bigger picture.

- Tail is high and exposes the dog's anal area where scent is disseminated from. The dog leans forward to sniff but this is not invited

- The other dog finds this a little intimidating and goes still

- Her face is tense, her paw raise shows worry, and her ears are held back



What's not?

This section is all about interactions that are not so good. Remember, all body language needs to be looked at in context – you need to be aware of the bigger picture to be able to tell what's OK and what's not. However, the rule of thumb (particularly with a puppy) is, if in doubt, leave it out!

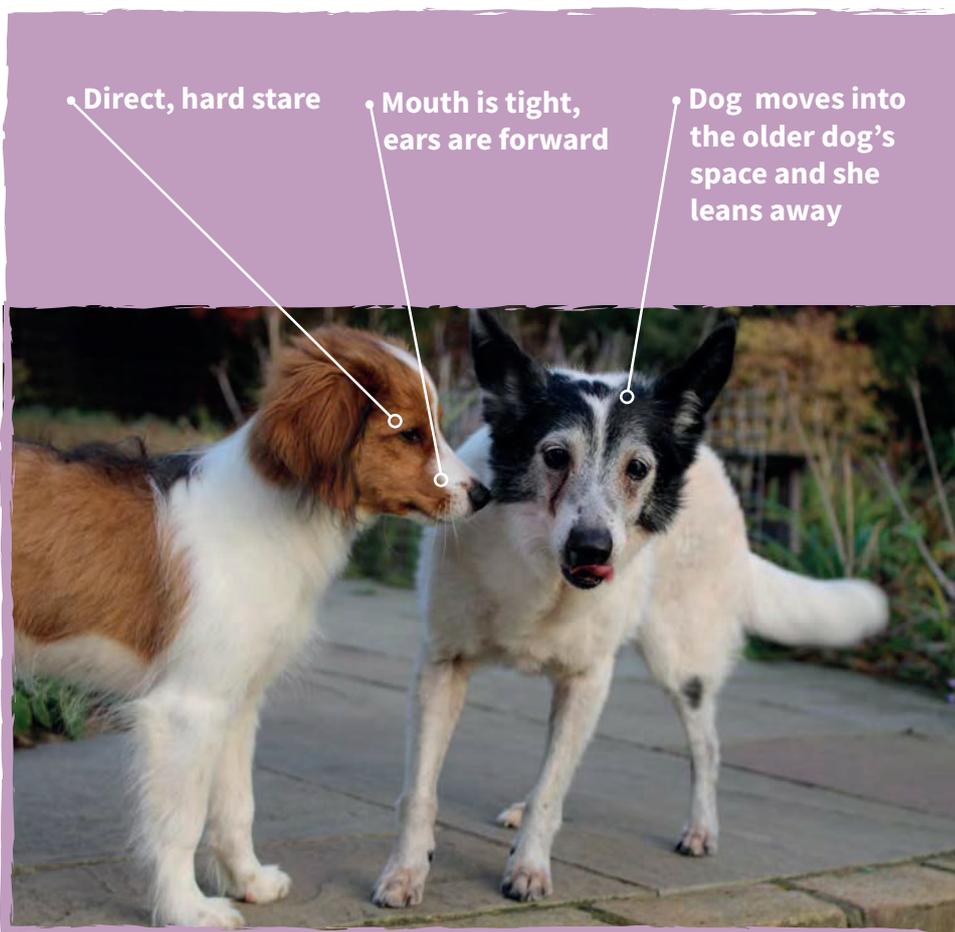
- **Generally, direct, straight approaches are more threatening than approaching in a curve or with lots of sniffing**

Fast approaches and very slow approaches are also more socially risky.

Watch out for the dog's head and throat being carried high, direct eye contact, and frontal alignment (where the dog approaches head-on and his body is aligned in a straight line).



- Direct, round-eyed stare
- Ears up and forward, brow is slightly furrowed
- Muzzle is tight and pushed forward
- Muscles tense
- Head, neck and spine aligned



- Stiffness, tight facial muscles or freezing on sight or meeting are risk warnings

• **Non-consensual body contact**

Non-consensual body contact, where one dog puts his paws, head, or throat on or over the other dog is often a pre-cursor to conflict. It might look like play, but if the body contact is not invited or reciprocated then it can be risky.



• Paw pads contain scent glands - so this dog is effectively 'marking' the other dog - and it's uninvited contact

• Head turns defensively and the dog reveals her teeth in response

• **'Whale eye' on meeting**

'Whale eye' is where the white of the dog's eye can be seen, and is caused by the dog keeping its head still but moving his or her eyes. It can indicate uncertainty, as it shows that the dog is 'freezing' momentarily.

Here it's a little warning from the red adult female dog (on the right) to a male not to push his luck!

• Dog is frontally aligned and leans into her space

• Sideways posture and a slight head turn say "no permission"



• **Manipulation of space**

This can happen deliberately – for example when one dog effectively blocks access to the other dog’s owner, or inadvertently - such as here - where the dogs’ leads have become tangled and the red and white dog is now in between the Boston and his owner.

(Note! There was no trouble here, but as an owner, it’s sensible to try and prevent that happening.)

Tension can also increase where space is limited (such as doorways, gates or narrow paths), so be aware and try and give the other dog room to pass.

• **Mutual sniffing, but tangled leads can lead to tension**



• **Where a dog is looking is what he’s thinking about!**



- For those of you who are really addicted to dog-watching, close observation will sometimes give you clues as to what dogs are thinking about. For example, inappropriate focus on another dog (rather than food, the owner, or some other distraction) tells you that this is the dog’s priority. Even glances can be very revealing.

In this photo, there’s one dog who is not thinking about the treats that are on offer. He’s more aware of the dog next to him. This is just a glance and is very subtle, (and there was no trouble!) but as the focus is a little inappropriate, caution might be required.

Also watch out for (and avoid):

- Play which is over-exuberant and neither owner can stop it by calling their dog to them
- T-shape (where one dog puts his chin and throat over another dog's neck) or other scent marking
- Targeted grabs or bites, where one dog aims to grab the other dog's leg, tail or under-carriage – even in 'play'
- Chasing that is one-sided or intimidating, or results in targeted grabs or bites
- Harassment, where one dog just won't leave the other alone despite his or her best efforts to say stop it, or go away
- Mobbing - where more than one dog harasses another dog and other dogs join in to 'victimise' it
- Mounting, or other unwanted sexual attention
- Anytime one of the dogs asks people for help or looks worried. Asking for help can include hiding behind someone's legs, jumping up at them, pawing, or barking at them. It should never be ignored.



• Hiding or asking for human help should never be ignored. Be a team with your dog

• Wide, round eyes. Tight mouth and 'clinging' with her paws, this little dog is obviously worried



When to take extra care (or simply walk the other way...)

Sometimes it's the human's behaviour that can mean it's safest to avoid another dog!

- When the other owner is on the phone or isn't paying attention to their dog
- When the other owner says, "Be good," as their dog approaches yours
- When the other owner shouts, "He only wants to play" as their dog runs towards yours (and they clearly have no control over it)
- When your dog is a very different size / strength / speed from the other dog
- When there are 'hot spots' – such as resources that one of the dogs might guard (food, toys or owners in close proximity)
- When the leads are tight (meaning the dogs can't act naturally or choose to avoid the situation if they need to)



Puppy ‘socialisation’

The word socialisation has become synonymous with play. However, this is not the true meaning, because socialisation is all about learning good social skills – and in many, many situations this means learning how to be calm and polite around other dogs, not leaping and jumping on them in excitement.

Of course, it’s fun to watch your puppy play with another dog, and if this is well balanced, with good mirroring and matching, then it can be a positive experience – especially if it’s brief and is interrupted by the owners being able to call their dogs away for treats and games.

However, all too often I am sent video clips of puppies playing with other puppies or adult dogs, and the question I would like to ask the owner is, “What is your dog learning now?”



Is he learning to use good body language and polite behaviour around other dogs, or is he learning that he can bully other dogs in the name of play? Is he learning that play is enjoyable and that he can stop whenever he wants to, or that other dogs are a bit frightening, overwhelming or unpredictable?

Puppies range from being a bit over-enthusiastic in their play with other dogs to being very fearful and withdrawn in their presence. Both responses need gentle, calm introductions, and the puppies need to learn how to meet and greet with manners.

Allowing any puppy interactions to over-spill into any kind of aggression - from either side - is not acceptable and can have long-lasting and negative effects. In an ideal world, puppies should believe that every dog they meet is safe, and that their owner will make decisions for them to ensure that this is the case.

Puppy parties, playgroups and off-lead play at puppy socialisation classes

You might think that getting a group of different puppies all together and allowing them to play willy-nilly in the vets waiting room, or the village hall, would make for great 'socialisation'. However, this is not the case.

Why would any owner want to teach their puppy that the vet's surgery is the place they go to have a wild, out-of-control romp with other dogs? Ironically, most owners want the complete opposite from their dog when it's an adult – they want him or her to be quiet, calm and confident in the waiting room – not looking for another dog to jump on.

Pups should not be let off the lead together until each one has been individually assessed by the person running the session, and that person should fully understand canine body language. Then, great matches can be made between the dogs – and friendships formed between them that boost confidence and can last a lifetime.

It's essential that any off-lead sessions are part of a structured plan in the session – not the main focus of it. Neither should it be the first thing that happens as soon as the owners step into the room. Off-lead play should be controlled – and this means that no bullying should be permitted: just like kids, parental control is required, and training should be the main emphasis of learning for pups and people.

If your puppy isn't happy in a group situation, it's up to you to take control and help them out. Remove them entirely if necessary. Don't be afraid to be seen as the 'party pooper'... your dog's behaviour for the next fifteen years might depend on your intervention.



- This puppy is moving fast into the other pup's space
- Furrowed brow shows worry - this puppy isn't happy
- Whale eye and slight head turn - the muzzle is tight

On lead versus off lead

Being on lead immediately creates more risk for dogs when they meet, as they are more likely to feel restricted and tense. Being closer to their owners can also increase some dogs' resource guarding tendencies.

Etiquette (and common sense!) dictates that if you see another dog on the lead and yours is off, it's polite to put yours on lead before passing them. You don't know why the other dog is on lead. He or she may be unwell or just had surgery. Just because your dog is good with other dogs doesn't mean it's OK for him or her to rush up to others, especially if they are on the lead.

When passing another dog on lead, engage your dog's eye contact by offering a food treat or toy, and walk past the other dog calmly without stopping. Give your dog lots of rewards for focusing on you rather than the other dog. You should be more fun than he is, after all.

If you have to stop and allow the dogs to meet on-lead, then it's important to allow as much natural movement from the dogs as possible. They should be able to sniff (or not), then move away from each other at will, without the leads becoming entangled or tight.

Both owners need to watch their dogs carefully, and give rewards for relaxed behaviour (praise and treats) and move away immediately if they see tension or stiffness in either dog, even for a split second.



- This chap is friendly but his 'square' body posture and face shape make him appear a little intimidating to the puppy

- Lowered body posture shows worry

- Puppy leans away to create space

If possible, walk along with the other person, rather than standing still. Parallel movement reduces the risk of the dogs facing each other head-on, or of one dog engaging in non-consensual contact that might then trigger the other dog to react.

If you have to stand still with the dogs on lead, try and encourage them to sit quietly and hold a toy, or wait for a treat, rather than playing together on lead. Apart from anything, playing on-leash allows the dogs to practise having a tight lead – which is the enemy of perfect heelwork!

When to avoid other dogs completely

Contrary to popular belief, play with other dogs is NOT an essential component of your dog's daily walks, or even of good socialisation. Polite social skills can also be practised by simply being calm around other dogs – just as children need to learn to settle down at school amongst other children.

While many dogs enjoy playing with others, some just don't, and to try and make these dogs play is counterproductive and potentially damaging.

There are also times when playing with other unknown dogs should be avoided, even if your dog likes to play. Personally, I would never allow my dogs to play with another dog that was unsupervised, if the owner did not understand their dog's behaviour, if I had seen any of the 'red flags' mentioned, or any bullying or over-aroused behaviour from the dog, now or in the past.

We owe a duty of care to our dogs, and although it might not always make you popular, knowing when to say 'no' is an integral part of the protection we give our pets.

Friends forever

Nothing makes me happier than seeing my dogs meeting and greeting their best buddies and having a lovely time with them, playing or just hanging out.

Building bonds between dogs takes time, careful introductions and a good understanding of canine body language. However, the results are worth every minute of investment!



Useful Resources



Discover the secrets of your dog's hidden language with Sarah's canine body language and facial expression online programmes.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to learn dog body language and know what your dog was thinking and feeling?

Although we will never know for sure, there are subtle clues that you can learn which will help you to understand and learn dog body language much better. If you can do this, you will be able to assess and even predict canine behaviour.

Take a closer look at Sarah's fascinating programmes - all online so you can access them at your convenience. For more information and a choice of free webinars go to:

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