

Play

How can you tell if your dog wants to play? When two dogs meet, both must be interested in playing for a good game to start. One might start off shyly but become more engaged as the other dog initiates play. Or either one may be reactive or too shy or scared to play.

To determine whether things are off to a good start, look for fluid, playful body postures. Stiffening, ears back, hackles up, short stiff tail wagging with the tail held up and staring can connote stress, which means it's less likely to be a positive interaction. Bodies held loosely, on the other hand, with graceful sweeping tail wagging, suggest the dogs are less stressed and therefore more likely to interact well.

Typically one dog will initiate play with a play posture, such as a play bow with her elbows on the ground and her hind quarters high in the air. She might bark once or twice with a 'hey, come play with me' voice, and may run towards then away from the other dog to initiate a chase.

If the other dog responds with play postures as well, it's time for a good game. If, instead, the other dog's response is to become stressed, it may not be the best time for the dogs to interact.

What does good play look like?

Play involves a rehearsal of fighting and predatory behaviors on an exaggerated and non-aggressive level. You may hear low growling, see dogs 'bite' each other with open mouths, run after each other and wrestle to the ground. Because some of these behaviors may at any given time look like fighting, it can sometimes be hard to tell when or if to stop an interaction.

One good rule of thumb is that dogs who are playing change roles often. That means one dog is on top, then the other, one dog chases, then the other. If one dog remains on top of a dog for an extended period of time, remove him and see if the other dog runs away (didn't want to continue) or tries to initiate play again (was having a fun time).

A dog who wants to be chased will bound forward happily, switching directions to fake out the other dog, her head held high and her movements fluid. A dog who does not want to be chased will typically have her ears back, her body low, and be stiffer in her running. She may glance over her shoulder continuously to see if the other dog is still there.

Don't let play become too aroused, because, even if it's still play, the line between play and a fight can be crossed over easily at a high arousal level. That means if the air becomes charged with loud growling or frantic movements, or too many dogs are chasing one dog too quickly, redirect the dogs for a moment, then let them start to play again. This will keep the game light and fun filled.