

3 Signs Your New Puppy May Be Overly Aggressive

It can sometimes be hard to tell when normal puppy play morphs into inappropriate aggressive play. Here's what normal play looks like - compared to the telltale signs of an overly aggressive dog ... Plus how to discourage the undesirable behaviors.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- It can be difficult for new puppy owners to understand at what point normal puppy play morphs into inappropriate aggressive play
- Signs of too-intense play include prolonged deep growling, a fixed gaze and stiff posture, and aggression that is situational or in response to a particular stimulus
- There are several methods for discouraging overly aggressive puppy play, such as introducing a distraction, giving a time-out, and using a leash during play periods as a quick means of gaining control
- To prevent aggressive behavior in your puppy, it's important to provide plenty of exercise and playtime, socialization, and positive reinforcement training from the minute your new puppy arrives home

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Puppy play involves a number of lively behaviors, such as chasing, barking, pouncing, growling, snapping, and biting. With all that going on, it's no wonder many new pup parents have trouble deciding whether their furry bundle of joy is playing normally, or showing signs of actual aggression. It's really important to know the difference, because play aggression requires special handling.

The Difference Between Normal and Problem Play

During normal play, your puppy may play bow (lower her head while raising her hind end), present her front end or side to you, hold the front part of her body up, wag her tail, zip back and forth, give high-pitched barks and growls, and spontaneously "attack." These behaviors are fun to watch and participate in with your puppy ... unless they become too extreme.

Little twists on normal play that can indicate a problem include:

- Prolonged, deep growling
- Fixed gaze
- Stiff posture
- Aggression that is situational or stimulus-dependent rather than spontaneous

These aggressive behaviors may stem from fear, territoriality, conflict, or pain and should be evaluated immediately by you, your veterinarian, and/or a **veterinary behaviorist**.

How to Discourage Aggressive Puppy Play

In order to mature into a good canine citizen, your puppy must learn how to play appropriately, and you can help him in the following ways.

- **Sidetrack bad behavior** — Keep a toy on hand that will grab your pup's attention as soon as he engages in inappropriate behavior. Offer him appropriate toys to mouth and chew on before he has a chance to make bad choices.
- **Give verbal cues followed by an action** — If your puppy is biting too hard during play, loudly say "Ouch," and stop playing immediately.
- **Give a time-out** — If your pup isn't responding to your attempts to stop a behavior, put him and a few toys in a separate room or his crate until he settles down.
- **Don't engage in aggressive roughhousing or play** — Some puppies have a low arousal threshold and can become very assertive, quickly. Avoid rigorous or intense play with these puppies, which can escalate into more mouthy play on their part, or nipping behaviors.
- **Use leashes and head halters** — You can use a leash indoors as well as outside to quickly stop a behavior. Don't yank or jerk the leash – simply use it when necessary to gain control over the situation. Head halters sometimes provide a more natural sense of control than collars do, but it's important to match the collar, harness, or halter to the personality and training needs of each puppy.

A Formula for Success

As your puppy's guardian, it's your job to interact with, socialize, and train her to help prevent abnormal play aggression. You can accomplish this in a number of ways.

- **Provide lots of exercise opportunities** — Healthy puppies are loaded with energy, and it's important to provide them with productive ways to expend it. Make sure your pet is getting plenty of walks and adequate playtime each day. In fact, aerobic exercise is a great way to distract your rambunctious, mouthy puppy, so consider going for a fast-paced walk. My motto is "a tired puppy is a good puppy." There will be less desire to engage in antagonist behaviors when your pup is too tired to stay awake.
- **Provide mental stimulation** — Treat release and puzzle toys will challenge your pup as she figures out the best way to get those treats into her mouth.
- **Playtime** — Spend time each day playing games with your puppy (fetch, hide-and-seek indoors, etc.) to help her burn energy and enhance the bond you share with her.
- **Teach obedience commands** — Make sure your puppy understands and responds to basic commands such as Come, Sit, Stay, Lie Down, etc. Make sure to use the commands often so your pup develops a habit of responding appropriately.

Training should involve the kids. If you have kids and a new puppy, make sure the children are a part of the training. Consider beginning your youngster's dog training education before you bring puppy home through an online resource such as **The Family Dog**.

- **Enroll in puppy class** — Regardless of how many dogs you've trained, I believe all puppies should go to puppy class. Meeting a dozen other puppies to interact with on a weekly basis during critical developmental periods can provide invaluable interactions you won't find in most neighborhoods. If you don't have access to puppy classes in your area, tackle puppy kindergarten with some online expert help from **Dr. Ian Dunbar**.

If you've rescued a puppy from a shelter and he or she has some emotional baggage (as almost all rescued animals do), set the stage for a low stress introduction to your home by implementing techniques suggested in **A Sound Beginning** program.

- **Teach delayed gratification** — Before giving your puppy something she wants, teach her to respond to a command like Sit before giving it to her. Discourage her from pushing for attention by pulling your hands away, leaning away, and looking away if she nudges you, whines, barks, or otherwise tries to solicit your attention. Once she stops the behavior, ask her to sit and then give her attention.

When you are leaving one room of the house for another, ask her to sit and stay for a few seconds before you allow her to follow you. Remember: the more your pup looks to you for leadership, the less likely she'll be to go rogue with her behavior.

- **Always use positive reinforcement** — Positive reinforcement training is the fastest, most effective, and most humane way to raise your energetic puppy into a well-behaved, well-balanced adult dog. Never use physical punishment methods such as scruff shakes, alpha rollovers, squeezing the puppy to the floor, nose thumps, holding the mouth closed, or swatting. These methods will be counterproductive to your training goals, not to mention frightening and hurtful to your puppy.
- **Stay off the floor if you have a rowdy pup** — Sitting on the floor with an excitable puppy will tend to make her overly excited quickly, putting you or other family members in a potentially vulnerable position. It's also more difficult to gain control of her from that position.
- **Socialize, socialize, socialize** — In order to become balanced adults, puppies need frequent, positive social interactions with a wide variety of animals, people, and stimuli during their first six months. And socialization should continue throughout your dog's life so she maintains good social skills. Don't wait until the dog is six months old to start class! Begin "puppy preschool" the day you bring your new bundle home.

Remember: your puppy can't train himself, and if he doesn't learn how to get along in the world as a youngster, he may grow into a difficult-to-manage adult dog who isn't pleasant to be around. Shelters and rescues are full of dogs with aggression and other behavior problems that show up later in life, but stem from unaddressed issues that began during puppyhood. You want to prevent your precious pup from becoming another statistic.
