

# APPROPRIATE PLAY IN DOGS



Play is such an important part of learning for both dogs and humans. When dogs play together they often play predatory games taking turns being the hunter and the prey. It can look quite intense at times, particularly if you are not used to watching dogs interact.

One of the things that you can look for during the play is frequent breaks where they offer calming signals to remind each other that this is just play and not escalating into something more.

Calming signals are a series of communication signals used to live in peace with each other and stop aggression. The term was coined by a Norwegian trainer named Turid Rugaas and according to her there are about 30 calming signals. They include; lip licking, the look away (turning the head away from each other), yawning, sitting, sniffing the ground and play bow are some of the more common signals.

The dogs should frequently break and offer the signals to each other so that the play does not get out of hand. If they are not taking the breaks on their own, step in and separate them for a moment particularly if they seem to be getting more intense. Give them a moment to calm down and reward them for using any calming signals.

Some dogs will stop using the calming signals if they have been punished by humans for using them or have spent a lot of time with a dog who has not been socialized and does not respond. If that is the case then

reward the dog when you see them and in some cases you can teach the signals such as sniffing the ground, walking slowly and asking for a sit or down while you interrupt play.

Dogs will use calming signals on their owners as well. Eye contact is confrontational for dogs so if you are standing over them trying to teach a sit or stay you might notice that they are lip licking, looking away or yawning. You will particularly notice them if you are calling your dog towards you in an angry tone, he will likely walk slowly, freeze, look away and lick his lips.

Another sign to look for during play is turn taking. Both dogs should be willing to take turns being the prey. If one dog is chasing another dog consistently without giving them a break then step in and enforce frequent breaks.

Having an opportunity to play with other dogs is so important for their well-being. It also gives them a chance to practice their own language and continue their socialization. If your dog does not play well with others, speak to a trainer about how to modify that behaviour!