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Puppy Playtime

Puppies love to play! But there are important things that you, as an owner, need to be aware of to help your puppy learn to play the right way. Without any direction, puppies will not only chase and pounce, but will also bite, growl, bark, and snap. This may seem cute when they are little, but these behaviors can lead to more serious aggression problems in an adult dog.

What is Normal Play?

A happy, playful puppy will often bow, wag its tail, offer its front and side to a person, jump up, run back and forth, and may bark or growl.

What are Early Signs of Aggression?

Aggressive behaviors include a deep, low growl, fixed gaze, and stiff body posture or turning away from you. These behaviors may be triggered by a certain situation or stimulus and can be related to feeling fear, pain, or trying to guard a person or object (like a favorite toy).

Tips to Encourage Proper Play

Exercise, exercise, exercise!!! Puppies have a lot of energy and need to be given opportunities positively use that energy (as opposed to destructive ways like tearing up the couch). Puppies should be taken on frequent walks. A great way to teach your new pup its name, get some exercise, and learn "Come" and "Sit" is an obedience game called "Monkey in the Middle." Two or more people stand opposite each other (a few feet apart) with a handful of small treats or kibble. The first person calls for the puppy in a high-pitched, friendly tone: "Fido, come!" When the pup approaches, it is commanded to "Sit!" and as the puppy receives its treat the second person calls for the puppy to come and sit in the same upbeat, high-pitched manner. This game continues back and forth between the callers and the puppy. As your puppy learns the game, the callers can stand farther and farther apart. As your puppy gets older, it can be commanded to do other tricks while playing this game (such as "Lie down," "Shake," or "Speak").

Play with your puppy! When not working on training exercises your puppy will appreciate playtime like learning how to fetch or chasing a soccer ball around your yard. For puppies how don't yet know how to fetch small treats or kibbles of food can be used in the beginning. Throw the treat a few feet away with the command "Fetch!" As your pup gets accustomed to this, replace the treat with a ball and reward your pup when it approaches and retrieves the ball. Finally, save the treat for when the ball is brought to you.

Teach basic obedience. Puppies should have at least 30 minutes of training every day (this can be broken up into several sessions). Kibble or treats can be used in the beginning, but you should get to a point where a reward is not always food. Other examples of rewards can be praise or petting. Food treats can still be given but sporadically. This will keep your pup guessing and encourage obedience without a guarantee of food.

Be the Leader! Dogs are pack animals and need to have a leader or they will try and fill that position. From an early age puppies need to know that you (and all members of the household) are the boss. Some basic leadership exercises to start early on include:

- Nothing in life is free: Your puppy needs to respond to a command such as "sit" before it receives anything it wants or needs (like dinner, playtime, petting)
- The leader decides when attention will be given: Snuggling a puppy is enjoyable for both

parties, but if a puppy becomes too pushy about getting attention (barking, nudging, whining) you should look away or walk away from the puppy. Once your puppy stops trying to get attention for 10 seconds, then you can ask it to sit and reward it with attention.

- The leader gives permission to move: When you are going from room to room in a house, ask the puppy to sit and stay for 1-2 seconds before releasing it with a “Come!” command to follow you.

Socialize, socialize, socialize! Puppies should be exposed to many types of people and animals during their first few months of life. These experiences should be kept positive to prevent fear, biting, and anti-social behaviors from developing. Remember, your puppy should not be taken to play with other dogs that you don't know (like a dog park) until he or she is fully vaccinated. Dog parks can be a lot of fun, but may be scary for a small puppy if more aggressive dogs are there. Try and find friends and family with dogs that you trust to introduce your puppy to. Puppy school is another great way to learn obedience, socialize with new people, and meet other puppies to play with. Continue to expose your pup to many people and animals as it gets older to maintain good social skills.

Encourage mental growth. Many “puzzle toys” are available that will release a treat after certain motions. These can keep a curious puppy busy for hours! Some toys even have different skill levels that allow for adjustment as your puppy learns. Look to see what your local pet store has to offer.

Be cautious about sitting on the floor to play with your pup. It is tempting, but puppies will tend to get overly excited and difficult to control and puts you in a vulnerable position. There will be times when your puppy plays too rough. It is up to you to discourage these behaviors so they don't become problems in the future. The following are suggestions for correcting your puppy when the play becomes inappropriate.

Vocalize your feelings: When your puppy is biting too hard, yell “ouch!” and walk away. In the litter, the other puppies will let one know if it is playing too roughly with a loud cry, why shouldn't you?

Distract your mouthy puppy with a toy to chew on instead of your hands. Use large toys so that you reduce the chance of your puppy's teeth making contact with your skin. If this happens, stop play immediately to let your puppy know that he needs to be aware of where he is putting his teeth.

Give the puppy a time out if it won't stop a bad behavior. Put it in a room by itself or in the kennel for a few minutes and then try again.

Never use physical punishment to correct your puppy's behavior! Grabbing by the scruff, pinning to the floor, swatting, or thumping the nose can all create fearful behaviors in an adult dog and may lead to an injury instead of just a correction.

Have fun playing with your puppy as it becomes an important part of your family! Remember that training and correction now will help your puppy grow into a well-behaved dog!

WHEAT RIDGE

3695 Kipling St., Wheat Ridge, CO 80033
Tel 303-424-3325 ● Fax 303-420-8360

WESTMINSTER

945 W 124th Av, Westminster, CO 80234
Tel 303-424-3325 ● Fax 303-420-8360

BOULDER

1658 30th ST, Boulder, CO 80301
Tel 303-424-3325 ● Fax 303-420-8360