

IS IT PLAY? CONSENT TESTS

What is play?

Play is more than running and jumping around. In fact, play is dogs reenacting important real-life scenarios such as "fight or flight" situations. It is how they learn how to communicate with each other. Through their real-life play scenarios, they learn how their own behavior prompts or changes the behavior of other dogs. Big time important stuff!

There are many different types of play styles within dog breeds. These play styles are both learned from their mother and littermates and innate to what their breed was specifically bred to do. For example, herding breeds typically circle and bite at the heels of their playmates while bully breeds are more physical and prone to wrestle.



Play is inhibited, bodies are loose, and body movements are big and sloppy. The dogs frequently engage in what is referred to as "role reversal". This means that one dog will be on top for a while "winning" and then will flip over to the ground to play the "loser". This makes for balanced and fair play between the dogs. During play they are also "self-handicapping". This means that they are not biting with the full force of their jaw and do not play with any more force than the weakest can tolerate. Abiding by these rules keeps the play going and fun for all involved!

Not sure if it is play? Here is what to do.

Just as we keep a close eye on young children during play to make sure no one is playing the bully and fun is hard for all, the same needs to apply to young dogs. It can be hard to tell if both are consenting to the rough and tumble play we are watching them engage in. This is when you do a consent test! It takes the guess work out of it.



How to perform a consent test.

- Approach the dog that seems to be the pushier player. Gently hold his collar or back end just in front of the pup's rear legs. Hold him and or move him back a few steps.
- Watch the other dog that you were concerned was having no fun.
 - Does she take the chance to get away? Then your hunch was correct.
 - Does she come back for more play? Then let them go back to play!

Training Tip: Consent tests are also great for de-escalating two exuberant players to give them breaks to come back to earth and focus on you for a bit. You can never do too many consent tests. So, apply liberally!

Are you doing LOTS of consent tests and think your pup is a bruiser who needs extra help?

First off, this is normal and okay! Secondly, we don't want our dogs to just 'work it out' or find another dog that will 'tell him off'. This can very quickly take a social rude pup to a scared and reactive pup. Fear is super easy to install and no easy feat to uninstall.

So, what to do? You start using time-outs. What these communicate to your dog is that the thing they just did, caused play to stop. When your pup LOVES play, that is a big deal to him!



Use a time-out when you observe your dog interacting in a manner that the other dog is attempting to avoid or actively asking for more space with growls, snarls or snaps. Your dog's behaviors that his buddies may find annoying, rude or scary can include: nipping, rough wrestling, incessant barking, rude rushed in greetings, body slamming, vertical play (both dogs on rear legs), consistent non-role reversal, or anything the one of the dogs is not tolerating well.

See the 'Time out' guide on how to perform a T/O. Communication, timing, mechanics, value of t/o, consistency, repetition and rewarding stuff your dog is doing right are all important to helping your dog figure out what exactly is earning him the timeout and what he should do instead.

Oh, and let's not forget about humping!

Humping is one of those dog behaviors; next to butt sniffing that make people feel uneasy! Humping is no question a *normal* part of play. Let's go back to what play is. It is rehearsal of important real-life behaviors, why would humping not be included here? But just like one dog can be too exuberant with his play biting and fighting, so can one be with their play humping. When it goes too far and the other dog no longer sees it as play, then a real fight can occur.



So just like other play scenarios where you may be unsure if both are consenting players, do a consent test! If they come back to play some more, then let them back at it. Just think of it as Animal Planet live in action, right in front of you. After all, life is all about "the birds and the bees, the flowers and the trees".