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## ARE THEY PLAYING OR FIGHTING?

Distinguishing playing from fighting can be difficult. During play, dogs often use postures and vocalizations that resemble those taking place during a fight. We need to pay attention to body language and signs of stress to know when to intervene and when to just watch.

Tips to ensure safe dog-wrestling:

- Not every dog is meant for the dog park, and that's OK. Some breeds are just quick to take offense. They may be better off playing at home with you or with a dog buddy they know well.
- Don't allow a puppy or dog to be ganged up on by other dogs. Even if they don't get hurt, a bad experience with other dogs can be traumatizing and could cause fearfulness that will be hard to overcome.
- Keep food and toys out of the picture. Most dogs are possessive of their food and their stuff. To them, it's worth fighting for.

Behaviours that say it's all good fun:

- The play bow, front end down, back end in the air, is a sign that a dog would like to initiate play. Sometimes the dog will slap his front legs down on the ground repeatedly.
- A big silly open-mouthed grin with loose, relaxed facial expressions.
- Exaggerated, bouncy movements, with lots of up and down motions, from both parties. The dogs are acting silly.
- Continuous growling and snarling, again exaggerated. This play growling may sound scarier than serious fighting.
- Happy, well matched dogs will frequently reverse roles. The dogs voluntarily make themselves vulnerable by "falling" down and exposing their bellies. They will allow themselves to be caught while playing chase and they will take turns chasing each other. They also take turns being on the top and on the bottom. Bites are inhibited so the dogs are not actually hurting each other.
- They keep going back for more. Even the dog on his back doesn't want to stop playing. They will probably take turns with most play-fight behaviours.

This is not fun anymore:



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- Movements are quick and efficient. No bouncing around, no taking turns. Fighting dogs do not waste energy on unnecessary, inefficient movements.
  - The dogs' bodies get very stiff and hackles are raised. Mouths are closed, with a curled lip, ears pinned back and low, warning growls. No silly smiles.
  - Excessive mounting, following a dog incessantly, non-stop running, staring or showing teeth. Pinning a dog to the ground and standing stiffly over him.
  - One dog is trying to get away from the other one and the body language is not happy and bouncy. Tail is tucked and the dog is not having fun.

If the dogs get into actual combat, hopefully it will be a short encounter and the "loser" will try to leave the area. There won't be any going back for more play.

Calming signals:

- Play bows
- Full body shakes
- Yawning
- Slow blinking
- Intentionally turning the head away from the other dog.

These are body language cues to avoid conflict. They often signal good intentions in dogs who enjoy social play. Watch for these to indicate possible stress in your dog if they start happening during play. They may be used in an attempt to appease an overstimulated or bullying play partner.

What can you do to make sure your dog is safe:

- Be present . By observing what is going on you can hopefully stop problems before they escalate into something dangerous. Watch for any warning signs, bullying behaviours , escalations in the speed or intensity of the dogs' play.
- The first line of defense is to have some good basic commands for your dog. Your dog should have a very reliable recall before he is allowed off leash at a dog park.
- Stay calm and confident. Yelling and grabbing at two tense dogs may escalate the problem and put you at risk for being bitten. Try not to physically separate the dogs. Instead you should encourage them to move away with upbeat engaging words or sounds. Use the "come"



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command in a happy, high pitched voice, a whistle or patting your leg and walking or running a few feet backwards briskly to encourage your dog to follow you.

- Allow your dog to relax away from play, reward this with a treat, and then if the play is calmed down and happy again, release your dog back into the play. You can practice these last two steps frequently by calling your dog out of normal, relaxed play, reward him and immediately release him again into the fray. This will help ensure a fast, happy response when you find you really need it.