

Debra F. Horwitz, DVM, Diplomate ACVB, Veterinary Behavior Consultations, St. Louis, Missouri

## Aggressive Play in Dogs



I often have owners of large-breed, adolescent dogs complain that the dogs are “aggressive” when in the yard. Closer questioning often reveals conflicting body postures from the dog. What is going on?

**M**ost pet dogs enjoy playing with their owners, but play behavior can get out of control. Common owner complaints include excessive mouthing of hands, forceful jumping at and on owners, biting and lunging behaviors, and barking. In some cases, the owner describes the dog as aggressive (due to the barking and lunging), and the interaction can be injurious, although questioning often reveals that the body postures and context are consistent with play.

### Play & Posture

The mixing of neonatal behaviors and adult behaviors in a random way results in the behaviors we call “play”; although these behaviors are common in adolescents, dogs of any age or size can exhibit play-related behaviors that can become aggressive. What distinguishes play from other types of aggression is the emotional affect and body posture of the pet. In dogs and wild canids, a distinct body posture, called a “play bow,” often occurs during play and seems to signal that “everything that occurs after this does not have agonistic intent.” The play bow is usually characterized by the front end down and back end up and is often accompanied by vigorous tail wagging, excited barking, animated open-mouth displays, and erect ears.<sup>2</sup>

### Elements of Play

Canine play behavior combines elements of jumping, mouthing, pushing, barking, and even some growling, all of which occur in an unpredictable sequence. Most dogs also show bite inhibition when they play, in which they reduce the force of their bites to avoid injuring the

continues



other party. Play behavior in young and older dogs is directed toward other dogs when they are available; if there are none, then play behavior may be directed toward people. Large-breed dogs often play in a vigorous and physical manner, tackling and slamming into each other. The same behavior directed toward a person is usually frightening and potentially dangerous, especially if the bites are uninhibited or the recipient is frail or smaller than the dog.

### Distinguishing Playfulness from True Aggression

The first step is to distinguish playful aggressive behaviors from more serious types of aggression, such as possessive aggression, conflict/dominance-related aggression, protective aggression, and predatory behavior. Careful questioning about the emotional affect should allow the clinician to determine what is happening. Dogs usually signal aggressive intent by staring, stiffening, growling deeply, retracting the lips to show the teeth, and perhaps piloerection.<sup>3</sup> If the information presented by the owner is ambiguous, a videotape may aid in diagnosis. If the dog is showing true aggressive arousal to specific stimuli, this should be addressed imme-

diately by first avoiding all aggressive triggers and then setting up a behavior modification program, detailed in other sources.<sup>3,4</sup> Once a clear diagnosis of play-related aggression is made, treatment can commence.

### Meeting Play Needs

Treatment is focused on meeting the play and exercise needs of the pet in appropriate ways and discouraging vigorous, unwanted play directed toward the owner. A combination of controlled exercise, increased owner control, pet obedience to commands, and behavior modification usually resolves the problem. Playtime must be scheduled on a regular, daily basis. Initially, all interactive play should be started and ended by the owner. Physical play, such as wrestling, should be avoided—the dog may not be able to distinguish whom they can and cannot play-wrestle. Daily exercise should be encouraged and can include walks and fetching. The owner should focus on fetch using two objects so that when the dog returns with one item, he or she can show the dog the other item. This usually results in the dog dropping the first item and becoming ready to chase the second one, allowing the game to continue under the

owner's control. Free play is allowed with toys when the dog is not interacting with people.

Dogs benefit greatly from daily walks, during which they can sniff and investigate their neighborhood. If the dog cannot be walked because of pulling or unruly behavior, then a head collar (Gentle Leader® head collar, Premier Pet Products) or a no-pull harness (Easy Walk Harness,® Premier Pet Products) should be used. In addition, time needs to be spent on instilling good responses to obedience commands, including “sit,” “down,” “come,” and “stay.” Having the dog perform a task before it is given something it wants is useful for creating a command-response relationship between the owner and the pet. The owner should ask the dog to “sit” before letting it in or out, before giving it food, before petting, or before any other thing the dog wants. The command is given one time—if the dog does not respond, the owner walks away and does not give the item.

### No Punishment

Owners should be counseled to avoid direct, interactive, or physical punishment. Such techniques may actually escalate aggression and create fear or anxiety related to interaction with the owner. If the dog begins to engage in inappropriate play responses, the owner should calmly and quietly exit the area, leaving the dog alone. Once the dog is calm, the owner can ask it to sit, and reward compliance with resumption of play.

Prevention is always the best strategy, so owners should be counseled early how to play appropriately with their dogs. Structured playtimes, including such formal dog sports as agility, and herding, should be encouraged, especially for working breeds with high energy levels. For many young, energetic dogs, use of humane control devices, such as head collars, allows owners to get control early and teach the dog how to interact properly. ■

See Aids & Resources, back page, for references, contacts, and appendices.