

The Importance of Play

by Jeanne Thomas

Play is getting a lot of attention in the dog world lately. The popularity of dog parks, dog play groups and doggy day care facilities all testify to a growing awareness that dogs need the enrichment of play. In 2008 two new books on dog play were published. Seminars and workshops on the topic are held across the continent. The 2008 annual conference of the Association of Pet Dog Trainers in the U.S. dedicated an entire day to a symposium on dog play.

Scientists are paying attention, too. Researchers in north America and Europe are studying play behavior to understand animal capacities for communication, ethics, empathy and cognition. Studies are finding that most if not all animals have special play signals, rules of engagement and experience sensations of pleasure and joy (and anger and disapproval). Even the idea that many animals can laugh during play is becoming more accepted in scientific circles.

Much of the academic attention to dog play relates to how dogs play together and dogs at play are fascinating to watch! I encourage you to carefully watch, enjoy and learn from your dogs at play: you'll get to see how dogs have fun while learning how to pull their punches, take turns, role play and enforce rules and boundaries. It's amazing and sophisticated social interaction.

Still, what I find even more fascinating is that dogs and humans love to play together. Most mammals play as juveniles: baby animals of all sorts all charm us with their earnest, awkward and joyful play. Birds play, too. There are plenty of touching stories and videos of inter-species play. But there are no other species that I am aware of that have a long standing and playful partnership such as dogs and humans do.

Why are dogs our play partners?

Part of our special relationship may be due to neoteny: the retention of juvenile qualities in an adult animal. Both humans and dogs have evolved to retain many childish (or puppyish) qualities throughout our lives, including the lifelong interest in play. It may be that extended childlike cuteness (think big eyes, round heads) and playfulness developed in both our species to trigger instinctive responses that keep us caring for our young throughout their long childhoods. Neoteny doesn't only effect physical cuteness and playfulness; retaining juvenile characteristics like curiosity and self confident friendliness develops whole species of adults that are outgoing and social; species that can make alliances and relationships outside their immediate family groups - and across species.

Not all humans and not all dogs have those outgoing qualities to the same degree, but there is little doubt that dogs when compared to wolves show strong physical and psychological neoteny - especially the dogs bred for companionship, like our Löwchen. Big round eyes, soft shaggy hair, floppy ears, short blunt noses, compact bodies and confident curiosity and playfulness trigger our nurturing instincts, signaling to our human brains "Adopt this cute young one and play with and take care it for 15 years or so...."

I find it interesting that evolution and selective breeding have also endowed dogs with the ability to learn to look purposefully at humans' faces: to make eye contact and interpret our facial and body cues, to request help and to know how to tell whether humans are friendly and helpful or dangerous and irritable. Recent research has found that dogs can follow human cues and signals much more successfully, and will turn to humans for help more frequently than hand raised wolves do, even though wolves may test better at other sorts of problem solving.

It seems that dogs have evolved and been selectively bred to be attractive to us and to communicate with us. Humans like cuteness, humans like responsiveness, humans like to play - so the dogs that could entice humans to play, to communicate, to nurture and to feed them, lived to breed another day. For dogs, coaxing humans to play is a life ensuring skill.

Why should humans and dogs play?

The first reason for us to play together is the simplest: play is fun! It just feels good. For many humans, dogs make it easier to shed our self consciousness and enjoy ourselves. Dogs are less burdened with dignity than we are, but they still can benefit from a partner who invites them to be active and silly for a while, especially if they spend most of their day on the couch or in the crate. Fun is also serious stuff. There's good indications that for both species, play keeps us younger and healthier mentally: it keeps our minds and moods in good shape even as we age.

For young animals, play keeps them from boredom, rehearses life skills and gets them some exercise. After a good long round of challenging play, dogs and kids can really relax, and a relaxed (or snoozing) young animal is one that doesn't need to look for entertainment or trouble. For an adult dogs and people, play helps maintain agility and strength and burns calories.

On an interpersonal level, regular dog-to-human handling and play, starting before the dog is weaned, gives our dogs the best start in developing trust and connection with humans. By playing with our dogs lifelong, we have access to one of the best rewards for training a happy working or performance dog. I believe the ability to engage your dog safely in play is a predictor of your long term ability to train your dog. Play can (and I think it should) make us the most interesting and rewarding playmates in our dog's world: better than any other person, better than any other dog. Sustained interaction and mutual communication make training much easier and rewarding.

Not least, with play, you have a tool that can to help your dog change it's emotional response to stressful situations, to defuse fear and aggression, and to build confidence and self control. Without the communication and connection that play with your dog builds, behavior modification is difficult and frustrating for all involved. Without the ability to engage humans in play and respond to training, a dog is at risk of being neglected, relinquished to a shelter or euthanized.

Inviting your dog to play

Believe it or not, there have been studies done on how to ask your dog to play. What works? Pay attention to your dog's play signals to you, and imitate them as well as you can. Try imitating a dog play bow! Or try taking running steps toward and away from your dog, patting your hands on the ground at your dog's toes, waving a toy or laughing like a dog. Add in your best imitation of a dog play face (a relaxed soft smile with open mouth) and you should be on your way.

I like the laughing technique a lot; if my dogs are hanging out nearby or lethargically following me around the house, giving a voiceless whispery heh---heh-heh sound will get them up and prancing in a moment, running for toys and offering me play bows, kisses and happy play face grins. Try it out, but don't give the laugh if you don't intend to follow it with play.

What doesn't work? Barking at your dog, thumping your dog's head with your hands, grabbing your dog or kissing them.

Dogs that don't know how to give or respond to play invitations (dog or human), or how to play with humans at all, can be gently introduced to play through food reward based training. This patient task might be required for dogs that have not been socialized as puppies, for dogs with physical developmental deficits, and for dogs that have been neglected or traumatized. If such a dog can learn to play even a little, there is a chance for that dog to experience a richer and longer life.

Games to play

Two excellent new books are available if you need some ideas or advice on how to play with your dogs: *Play with Your Dog* by Pat Miller and *Play Together, Stay Together* by Karen B. London and Patricia B. McConnell. These books give advice on how to play some of the classic games, and some excellent games to challenge your dog's nose and intellect that you may not have thought of. Both books explain

basic dog play styles and body language, give recommendations on great toys to look for, suggest tricks to teach, sports to try, and some play pitfalls to avoid.

I won't try to duplicate all the information in these books, but here are ways I play and train using some of my dog's favorite games:

Tug - THE game of choice for my Lowchen. I'm glad to report that research has shown that playing tug with dogs does NOT increase dominance or aggression problems. It does teach them to use their teeth on toys, not on humans, and if you pause a tug game often to practice sits and downs and tricks, can also teach them how to control their impulses and switch their minds from excitement to calmness.

We use simple rope toys as well as stuffed toys made of leather and fire hose materials. I always teach my dogs "give" as an early part playing tug with my dogs, exchanging a treat for the toy before resuming play. My dogs request tug by bringing the toy and laying it on my lap or at my feet. If I am available to play, I'll ask the dog to sit or down, then offer the toy by holding it horizontally in my hands, shaking it and waving it from side to side. When the dog grabs on, I'll pull to the left and to the right, not up and down (that's tough on the spinal cord).

With my BIG dogs, I brace my elbows on my body and don't extend my arms as they tug. With my small dogs, I'll also offer the toy above their heads: my Löwchen, Raleigh, especially loves to leap up to grab the toy. Sometimes, if the dog is not sure he wants to play, I'll offer it on the ground, wiggling it from side to side, making it move like a tempting prey animal, darting around.

I use Tug as a reward for heeling and for long comes and stays or any difficult bit of training we've just finished. As we work, the toy is in my pocket or zipped inside my training bag. When it's time to reward hard work with play, I whip that toy out of my pocket, or run to the bag saying excitedly "Let's get a toy!" I often let the dog pull the toy from my hand and "win"; they always bring it back to me for more.

Get It - We play this game mostly with balls and rope toys. With a toy in my hand, I ask the dog to sit, down or do a trick, then I throw the toy and say "Get it!" If the dog runs after the toy, I can cheer and encourage them to bring it back. If they bring it all the way to my hand, I'll ask for the give and throw it again as the reward for bringing it back. If they drop it part way, I say "Uh-oh! Where's the toy? Find it!" and end my part of the game until they return the toy to me.

This game gets very complicated when four dogs want to play: we get to practice long stays as each dog has a turn. The dog that breaks their stay has to repeat the stay; the dogs that hold the stays get their turns first. This is another game I use as reward for obedience exercises and tricks: the jump and run of the retrieve lets dogs release the stress and strain of trying to learn to do a finicky obedience behavior just so.

Catch Me - So simple: I crouch down and laugh at my dog and then run away saying, "Come! Catch me!" The dog chases me, catches me and jumps around happily. If I want to add in some training, at this point I ask for a sit or a down and sometimes a stay. When the dog takes its position, I walk away, release the dog (I release my dogs from work with "OK!") and repeat. This game is GREAT as a way to teach your dog that coming to you fast is fun. If you play it often with your dog, it's also a great way to get your dog to run to you in an emergency, much more effectively than yelling.

One last word on play: if you interrupt longer sessions of play for short bursts of training, and reward progressively longer sessions of training with little bursts of play, your dog will figure out that responding to your cues is just one more way to play with you and will look forward to training time and performance time with you. Then sports like freestyle rally and agility can become extended joyful events for you and your dog to play. Have fun!

Continuing Education

Aloff, Brenda. *Canine Body Language A Photographic Guide*. 372 pages. Dogwise Publishing, 2005.

Balcombe, Jonathan. *Pleasurable Kingdom - Animals and the Nature of Feeling Good*. 274 pages. Macmillan, 2006.

Bekoff, Marc. *The Emotional Lives of Animals*. 214 pages. New World Library, 2007.

Coppinger, Raymond and Lorna. *Dogs: A Startling New Understanding of Canine Origin, Behavior & Evolution*. 251 pages. Scribner, 2001.

London, Karen B. and McConnell, Patricia B. *Play Together, Stay Together*. 90 pages. McConnell Publishing Limited, 2008.

Miller, Pat. *Play With Your Dog*. 150 pages. Dogwise Publishing, 2008.

Steinker, Angela. "Click and Play: Using Play as a Reinforcer". Web article at <http://www.clickertraining.com/node/1165>

<http://www.theotherendoftheleash.com/tag/dog-dog-play/> Patricia McConnell's blog entries on dog play.

<http://www.petalk.org/LaughingDog.html> Website about research on dog laughter and how it affects dog behavior. Includes an audio clip of the laughing dog sound.