In the previous issue, we wrote about the ways dogs communicate and resolve conflicts in a non-play context. We described how some canine interactions can be mistaken for fighting when two dogs may be just settling a disagreement or setting appropriate boundaries (e.g., “No! You can’t take the bone I’m chewing!”). In this article, we consider another kind of interaction between dogs that people sometimes misinterpret: social play.

PART II
the language of play
(some like it ruff)

By Barbara B. Smuts, PhD, and Camille Ward, PhD

We have been videotaping dog-dog play for more than 10 years and, together with our colleagues, have analyzed hundreds of hours of data to test hypotheses about play. We present our results at animal behavior conferences and publish in scientific journals. Here, we focus primarily on dog play that some might consider “inappropriate” or “not safe.”

In the field of animal behavior, researchers often refer to social play as “play fighting” because it includes many of the behaviors seen during real fights. For example, during play, one dog might chase and tackle another, or use a neck bite to force a partner to the ground. Dogs will also hip check or slam, mount, rear up, bite, stand over, sit on, bark, snarl, growl, bare their teeth and do chin-overs (i.e., place the underside of their chin over the neck of their partner). However, despite the overlap in behaviors, some clear differences exist between play fighting and real fighting. When playing, dogs inhibit the force of their bites and sometimes voluntarily give their partner a competitive advantage (self-handicap) by, for example, rolling on their backs or letting themselves be caught during a chase — behaviors that would never happen during real fighting.

In addition to inhibited bites and self-handicapping, dogs clearly demarcate play by employing signals, such as play bows (i.e., putting the front half of the body on the ground while keeping the rear half up in the air) and exaggerated, bouncy movements. Anthropologist Gregory Bateson called play signals meta-communication, meaning communication about communication. Humans employ meta-communication a lot. For example, when teasing a friend, we may smile or use a certain tone of voice to indicate that we’re just kidding. Similarly, dogs play bow to invite play and to convey playful intentions during play. Marc Bekoff, while at the University of Colorado, did a study showing that dogs are most likely to play bow just before or immediately after performing an especially assertive behavior, such as a bite accompanied by a head shake. This pattern suggests that playing dogs recognize moments when their behavior can be misinterpreted as serious aggression and compensate...
by reminding their partner, “I’m still playing.”

By using meta-communication, social beings can step through a looking glass into a world that operates by different rules. Meta-communication allows humans and dogs to pretend—that is, to perform actions that appear to be one thing but actually mean something completely different. To people unfamiliar with the notion that some nonhuman animals have this ability, play that includes archetypal aggressive behaviors, like snarling and growling, can be quite confusing. Close attention to the context, however, can help us differentiate between play aggression and real aggression.

Even though play fighting is very different from real fighting, people often feel the need to intervene. Sometimes it is obvious at the beginning of a bout that two dogs are playing, but once the dogs start growling or their arousal intensifies, observers may no longer be sure that the dogs are still playing. After all, humans instinctively avoid a dog who is snarling or baring his teeth, and it is natural to think that our dogs should do the same. When people interrupt really rowdy play, they assume that they are “playing it safe,” that is, doing no harm. But what if this assumption is mistaken?

Our research shows that for many dogs, play fighting is the primary method used to negotiate new relationships and develop lasting friendships. Although play is fun, it also offers serious opportunities to communicate with another dog. In this sense, play is a kind of language. Thus, when we regularly break up what we consider “inappropriate” play, are we doing our dogs a service, or confusing them by constantly butting into their private conversations? Most importantly, how can we tell the difference?

First, we need to determine whether both dogs are enjoying themselves and want to continue playing. Look at their postures and facial expressions. Their movements may be light, bouncy and exaggerated and they may have relaxed, open mouths (like those on Bark’s Smiling Dog pages). Watch for play signals, which can often be quite subtle—a quick dip or bounce rather than a full-blown play bow. If you’re not certain that a dog really wants to
be playing, try briefly holding that dog back. If she presses her body into yours and avoids looking at the other dog, she’s showing relief at the interruption and you should help her avoid the other dog. If she pulls against your grip in an attempt to interact with the other dog, release her. If she runs toward the other dog or directs a play signal in his direction, then she is saying that she wants to keep playing.

An interaction like the one just described is straightforward and easy to read. However, what about instances that may not be so clear-cut? We encourage you to discard any preconceived notions about what dog play should and should not look like—at least for the time being. For example, are traditional “no-no’s” like neck biting, rearing up, body-slamming and repeated pinning by one dog ever okay when two dogs are playing? It all depends on the individual dogs and the kind of relationship they have with one another.

Consider an example of a close canine friendship founded on unorthodox play. When Sage, a one-year-old German Shepherd, first met Sam, a four-month-old Labradoodle, he was very rough with Sam. He would pin Sam with a neck bite every few seconds. No sooner would Sam stand up than Sage would neck-bite him and flip him on his back again. At first, we thought that Sage might be too rough for Sam, so we would intervene by holding one or both of them back. However, each time, Sam would try his hardest to get to Sage, despite the inevitable pinning. As Sam grew larger, eventually matching Sage in weight, Sage added body slams and mounting to their play. With the exception of frequent rear-ups (in which they adopted identical roles, facing one another and boxing with their front paws), Sage usually maintained the more assertive role (neck biting, pinning, slamming and so forth). Yet, because Sam was always an enthusiastic partner, we let them continue to play together.

To this day, their play remains asymmetrical; Sage repeatedly brings down Sam with neck bites and continues to bite Sam’s neck once he is down. Sam wriggles on the ground and flails at Sage with his legs while Sage, growling loudly, keeps biting Sam’s neck. More than once, bystanders have thought the dogs were fighting for real, but Sage’s neck bites never harm Sam, and Sam never stops smiling, even when he’s down. Sometimes, when Sage is done playing but Sam is not, he’ll approach Sage and offer his neck, as though saying, “Here’s my neck; go ahead and pin me.” This move always succeeds; it’s an offer Sage cannot resist.

With Sage and Sam, allowing play to continue was the right decision. Their early play interactions burgeoned into a lifelong friendship. Even today, the two middle-aged boys will sometimes play together for five hours at a stretch, stopping only occasionally for brief rests.

When they are finally done, they often lie together, completely relaxed, with their bodies touching. Their faces are loose and smiling, and they seem almost drunk in an endorphin-induced haze.

This relationship shows that play does not necessarily have to be fair or balanced in order for two dogs to want to play with one another. Years ago, scientists proposed a 50/50 rule: for two individuals to engage in play, they must take turns being in the more assertive role. Scientists thought that if one individual was too rough or forceful (e.g., pinning her partner much more often than she was being pinned), the other dog would not want to play. Until our research, this proposition was never empirically tested.

Over a 10-year period, we studied pair-wise play between adult dogs, between adult dogs and adolescents, and between puppy littermates. Our findings showed that the 50/50 rule simply did not apply. Dogs do not need to take turns being assertive in order for play to

**IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS**

**First,** when we talk about play fighting, we mean play between two dogs rather than play between many dogs (we will address multi-dog play in a future article). Although multi-dog play can be fine, sometimes it involves ganging up, and then it’s time to intervene.

**Second,** we are referring to play fighting that doesn’t involve toys, which can become the object of guarding and aggression.

**Third,** we recommend caution with young, inexperienced puppies. If traumatized by other dogs early on (for example, in a poorly run puppy class), a puppy may grow into a dog who is fearful, defensive or even aggressive with other dogs. (See Patricia McConnell’s “Early Education” in the May 2011 issue for more on well-run puppy classes.)

**Fourth,** rough play typically works best between two dogs who are friends (see our article, “Does Your Dog Need a BFF?” in the June 2010 issue). Dogs who play together a lot often develop play rituals, such as Safi and Osa’s mutual snarling, that may not be appropriate between dogs who don’t know each other well. Finally, work with your dog until she reliably comes when you call her for a brief play pause.
... research suggests that animals play to help form social bonds, enhance cognitive development, exercise and/or practice coping skills ...