



Maddie's Institute

## *The Best Medicine: Playing with Shelter Dogs*

### Live Webcast Audience Q&A

By Dr. Brenda Griffin

October 2, 2014

- 1) **Q: Have you ever had a situation where a dog playing with a human (running around in an exercise area; throwing a ball) causes the dog to become over stimulated and appear to become a little aggressive?**

A: Some dogs become highly aroused during play - and the potential to stimulate unruly, undesirable, and inappropriate behavior is certainly something we do see. In this case, the dog may become overly exuberant when stimulated - jumping up roughly or knocking into you - often nipping at your arms - or even nipping at your heels (common for herding breeds). This is different from a dog that becomes aroused and becomes overtly aggressive - signs of overt aggression might include a low growl, freezing, a hard stare, lunging, snapping and/or snarling. Sometimes “muzzle punching” is seen where the dog jumps up and hits you in or near the face with his/her muzzle. This is certainly less subtle than more overt aggression and can be difficult to distinguish from unruly, jumpy-mouthy behavior, but it may be an important tip off to more serious behavior with a different underlying motivation than that of a friendly, over exuberant dog with “bad manners” that “get worse” when he/she is excited. Remember, aggression is a complex and very ritualized form of communication for dogs—it is their way of letting you know they are uncomfortable and want you to get away from them.

The key to distinguishing these behaviors is to look at body language for signs of fear, defensive and offensive aggression. It is also important to consider if the behavior is “interruptable” or not. Safe play should avoid rough jumping and mouthing and should be “interruptable”. This means that the dog should diffuse and calm down when the play stops, or when you become still. If the dog continues to escalate in the face of this, that can certainly pose a safety risk and may be an indicator that the dog is trying to communicate that he does not like what you are doing, or that the dog’s intent is to cause injury. Remember, it is fine for a dog to get highly aroused, as long as they do not pose a safety risk to you.

Some dogs become very jumpy-mouthy when they are highly stimulated and aroused. In this case, although the underlying motivation and function of the behavior is not aggression, these behaviors can cause human injury and these are not desirable behaviors. So, what to do? If the dog becomes over-aroused, resist the urge to scold him or pull away - that will only encourage him and add fuel to the fire. Instead, be silent and “be a tree”. If you are holding a toy or tug, drop it immediately, fold your arms and turn your back to the dog. Stand still and quiet like a tree. The dog’s arousal should diffuse - it may be directed to the toy at this point, but then should simply diffuse within a few moments. If it does not, the dog will need to be evaluated by a professional to determine if the dog’s behavior can be safely managed. Ruling out fear and pain are crucial as well as ensuring that the dog does not have a propensity for aggression towards people.

In most cases, you will find that you simply have a friendly dog who is very excited and is trying to get even more of your attention by jumping and mouthing - He does not know how to play any other way - but with a little patience, consistency, redirection, and rewarding of more appropriate behavior - you will be able to have a fine time playing in no time!

**2) Q: If you have a dog who doesn't read cut-off signals of other dogs so there's no ebb and flow to the play, but it continues to escalate, is there a way to help them learn better play etiquette?**

A: Yes, in some cases there is! It looks like your question is about dog-dog play, and not human-dog play. So, if you are thinking about dog-dog play, my advice is that it is all about finding the "right" playmate for that dog. In my experience, it is often the young boisterous males that play rough and rowdy (rushing, body slamming, biting a bit too hard) - and, they don't always understand how to tone down their play style even when another dog signals them to do so. They basically are quite "rude" and other dogs may not tolerate it. I have found that pairing such dogs with a young adult female can be very helpful. Dogs have a way of teaching other dogs things socially that we may not be able to teach them - and sometimes an older bitch can help a young male dog see the light! Certainly, the interaction needs to be monitored so that a fight is not triggered - if dogs fight, they should not be re-paired with one another. Keep in mind that it is possible for them to develop fear or aggression to other dogs from such negative encounters, so don't allow such interactions to occur or to be repeated if they do occur. That being said, the best way for a dog to learn to tone down their play style is to be appropriately scolded by another dog - and then when they do tone it down a bit, the dog will re-engage them in play. You may also identify "ambass-a-dogs" who are canine ambassadors in terms of being benevolent teachers to such rough play dogs - these may be male or female dogs that are just particularly good at helping other dogs learn appropriate social interactions without becoming reactive themselves and diffusing aggression, while also correcting the over-exuberant dog's behavior. As an example, McCoy, the black dog in some of the video clips, did a wonderful job teaching Boogie to play more appropriately - he really got onto him when he bit too hard during play or was otherwise too rough - and then re-engaged him in play, even handicapping himself to be sure Boogie was comfortable. So, dogs of either sex can be great teachers - but they need to have strong social skills and to be confident and behaviorally healthy themselves. I find having a few behaviorally healthy dogs in my pack helps me with the foster dogs I bring home! Be sure to always watch body language carefully to ensure that dogs are free of fear and anxiety and are coping well in the social milieu when you match them for such play sessions. Also, it is important for you to be confident and friendly and not nervous so that you do not add stress to the situation that could affect how the dogs interact.

In terms of dog-human play, there are a number of games that are excellent for teaching impulse control - which is vital for the dog that becomes quickly aroused and resorts to unruly behavior including jumping up too exuberantly and mouthing you. Check out my "Playing with Shelter Dogs" handout for more ideas and specific recommendations for playing with dogs like this.

**3) Q: My new dog is shy/skittish but making good progress week to week (I've had her 10 weeks, she's 7 years old). Is there something I can do now to move her toward**

**play or do I need to wait till she's calmer? She is more relaxed around dogs than humans.**

A: Great point to bring out that some shy, anxious dogs are more relaxed with other dogs. They can learn from the other dogs to relax - remember the impact of emotional contagion. You might try playing with your other dogs while she watches... give her a toy and let her hang out on the sidelines. You might see that she joins in to play from a distance. [Watch this video](#) to see "Dopey" the anxious beagle playing on the sidelines when other dogs are playing. As the other dogs play, you will see Dopey watching at the 12 o'clock position on your screen - then with a little verbal encouragement, he picks up a toy and starts playing on the sidelines. See, it IS contagious!

**4) Q: Do dogs laugh? If so, how do they show that?**

A: Great question! No one has really defined this *per se* although one author hypothesized about it - you can read more here: [http://www.animalsheltering.org/resources/magazine/may\\_jun\\_2006/quieter\\_shelter\\_dogs\\_laughing\\_matter.html](http://www.animalsheltering.org/resources/magazine/may_jun_2006/quieter_shelter_dogs_laughing_matter.html). This has not been verified, and I suspect we have much to learn about all the nuances of canine communication and signaling. But, I certainly think in some form or fashion, they probably do "laugh". They certainly exhibit joy, playfulness, and many other positive emotions along the same lines as laughter. The happy-go-lucky personality of many dogs and that "happy face" we see when they are relaxed and playful surely suggests that they do!

**5) Q: What about dogs who enjoy "hanging out" together but just don't engage in play? Is something we're not aware of causing them to NOT play? We find some in the shelter who really seem to enjoy being together but don't actually play - any worries?**

A: How much dogs play may be dependent on a number of factors including not only health, welfare and environment, but also on their age, personality and prior experiences. That being said, even geriatric dogs play sometimes. It is a natural behavior - perhaps a bit of cold weather or something extra fun and stimulating might get them kicking their heels up now and again. Dogs certainly do get bored and shelter dogs must cope with the tedium of confinement. Provide as much enrichment as you can - and monitor to be sure you are seeing other normal behaviors - exercise, chewing, social interaction, exploration and so forth. Be sure that the dogs are not displaying any signs of anxiety. If they are relaxed and positively stimulated, they will be very likely to play!

**6) Q: How do you end the first session of fetch?**

A: Always leave them wanting more! Toss them a treat to get the toys back and then put the toys away - Be very positive - Praise them and pet them - and tell them you will be back to play again tomorrow!

**7) Q: Does a shelter need a special play area apart from kennels to allow the dogs to play? Or is in kennel, hallway, etc., good enough?**

A: Anywhere you have space is fine. One shelter I used to volunteer with regularly used the human bathroom as an area to play with dogs. Not that I recommend that per se ☺, but use whatever space you have - in the infamous words of Project Runway's Tim Gunn, "Make it work!" (Or, maybe that should be. "Make it play!")

**8) Q: Should "chase the squirrel" game be played with dogs who want to chase real squirrels/other things when being walked on leash?**

A: Dogs are predators - these games don't make them predators, they already are - we are looking for healthy, appropriate channels for their natural drives. So, yes! Absolutely!

**9) Q: Are owners who do not control their dogs the most likely to find that tug games increase out-of-control behavior?**

A: I would say that owners must learn how to behave so their dogs will behave! I agree that some dogs are "out of control" but this is not to say that the "owner needs to have control" but more that, the owner needs to understand how to hone healthy social skills for their dog through the ways in which they interact with them to manage and prevent problem behaviors, while rewarding the ones that are socially appropriate and desirable. The same is true whether or not we are talking about walking nicely on a leash or playing tug.

**10) Q: How do you feel about the use of PVC piping as food/treat puzzle dispensers? Are there valid concerns about cancer risks by using PVC in play?**

A: I love it, and highly recommend it. Great, practical and inexpensive. You can get a PVC pipe cutter at any hardware/home improvement store and cut PVC pipe in 6-8" lengths and stuff with peanut butter, squeeze cheese, canned dog food, kibble, biscuits, pop corn, use your imagination - freeze it - voila! Delicious. Great for strong chewers! Check out this video: [PVC food tube toy](#).

**11) Q: Do you see breed differences in toy selection?**

A: Interesting question! We certainly see lots of individual preferences! Some breeds typically are pretty toy fixated - like retriever types who just want to hold anything in their mouths! Others are less inclined, unless they have been taught to play with toys from a young age... I don't know of any studies that have looked specifically at breed preferences for specific toys, but I suspect if a study were done, there might be some. But, really it is up to the individual dog's preference. I say find a toy they LOVE, and then teach them how to engage with you and the toy! They need to learn to get it, enjoy it, be praised for that, give it back, get a treat, get it again, and so forth.

**12) Q: I've had a couple of foster dogs who would not play "tug." Any way to get them interested?**

A: Do a toy trial and find a toy they like - let them have it - praise them for taking the toy - trade them for a treat - then let them have it again. Next is to use the Chase IT stick, once they are in the game, then it will become easier to engage them directly in a game of tug. See directions in my handout.

- 13) **Q: My old dog is partially blind, has mobility problems and has CHF with little cardiac reserve. Is there a quiet game I can play with her that doesn't rely on vision?**

A: I would try a nose work shell game! Use 3 small bowls or cups. Hide a food treat under one of them - mix the cups up. I bet she can find it! Do it again, just be silly and have fun. You can also try the muffin pan game - put a treat in several of the muffin pan cups and then put a ball or an old balled up sock over all the cups - bet she can find the treats there, too! These "nose work" type games would be fun and safe for her. Be sure to use low calorie treats or reduce her meal size so she does not gain weight if she plays a lot! Extra weight would be a bad thing for her heart and joints. But, do play and just be silly! Another fun game for you to play with her (not one to do with a dog you don't know well) is the "hide your face" game. Just lie on the floor next to her - and giggle and giggle and hide your face and roll over and peek, giggle and hide your face again. This is a great way to get her attention, and get her to lick your face... Not everyone likes this, but I let my dogs lick my face. It is a natural greeting behavior for them - it gets them going and they have FUN! My dogs love this game! If she does not get into it, try doing this game just as soon as you get home when she is real excited to see you - that is a sure fire way to engage her with it - then you will be able to play it any time once she sees how fun it can be! You can also try making funny noises - this is fun for some dogs! I don't do that with dogs I don't know well because I don't want to scare them. But, I will do it with dogs more familiar to me. One of my dogs just loves it when I make silly noises. Have fun!

- 14) **Q: Is it okay to chase a dog if it truly is a back and forth play session (i.e., you chase the dog and then he chases you, and this goes back and forth)?**

A: Chase should be one way only - the dog chases you. Please refer to the handout for detailed instructions!

- 15) **Q: In the videos with Boogie you toss treats but don't directly feed him and you aren't marking his success (yes or click) when you're shaping. Is there a training reason for this or is it just how working with Boogie evolved?**

A: Ah ha! A trainer must be asking this question! Nice observation! For the demo videos, I purposely did not emphasize reward markers (verbal or clicker) because I really wanted to show that you can just GO PLAY. I decided to keep it simple so that no one would get hung up on having to use a certain word, or a clicker, or feel like they could not play successfully without the right timing, training or equipment. There is no doubt that the use of markers and good timing can aid in communication and training - and for some dogs and in some circumstances, it is more important than others. For many attention seeking, high energy dogs in the shelter, you may be surprised at what you can do simply by teaching people simple games to play with them - without being too technical or prescriptive ☺. The videos you saw were all filmed on two consecutive afternoons - and Boogie had never done or seen any of that stuff. He did know "sit," but that was the only cue or game that he had any experience with prior to the filming. Think about it: Boogie first learned the GET IT - GET IT food toss game. So easy and so fun - he found it very rewarding to go chase that cheese ball, right? Then, I paired that with his

contact with the platform. I set him up for success by standing by the platform holding a cheese ball. He touched the platform, and he INSTANTLY got the food toss. Then, he was off of the platform - convenient since the game is to get on the platform, so we could begin again right away - and Boogie had to think, wow, that was fun, now, what did I do to get the food toss? He quickly learned that what scored him a food toss was to touch the platform! Bingo, another immediate food toss. How fun is that?! Take a look at the handout for detailed instructions on playing this skame. Not all dogs are such quick studies - Boogie was a movie star. But, the same steps and patience can be used to play this game with any dog! And, people like it, all they need to know is the dog touches, they toss, and then we do it again. FUN! Technically speaking, you are absolutely correct to want to add a more formal marker, but effective operant conditioning can absolutely still occur - and sometimes "less is more" when engaging human subjects! That was the method to my madness here. I do all I can to keep it simple - and just GO PLAY!

- 16) Q: With Boogie and "place", why were you throwing the treats away from the target? Seems counterintuitive if people are trying to teach a not confident dog to go to and stay at a place to feel secure.**

A: Good question. Please refer to the detailed instruction in the handout for playing this game. You absolutely can feed them on the platform - it is best to use the food as a reward and not a lure, so they understand they have the power - They get on that platform and bones rain from the sky, cookies come to them, it is a great place to be! For Boogie, he loved doing the food toss game so much, that it was an easy transition for him to learn that touching the platform means FOOD TOSS game on! He touched the platform, and he INSTANTLY got the food toss. Then, he was off of the platform - convenient since the game is to get on the platform, so we could begin again right away! The food toss was a great reward for him - it was the consequence of his action to touch the platform. This was meaningful to him, and we know this because he was motivated to get on the platform again. If a shy dog was not "into" the food toss game, then feeding on the platform would be better. Dogs do let us know what they find rewarding - so if they like it, do it - if they don't, modify it to make it work. I hope that makes sense. Some shy dogs LOVE to chase food - some are too inhibited. In this case, I kindly deliver the food directly to them and then encourage them to step off the platform, and then back on for another delicious treat! Good question!

- 17) Q: How do you discourage mouthing in a young puppy?**

Great question! It is very important to purposely teach puppies bite inhibition. When puppies are playing with their littermates, and play gets a little too rough and one puppy bites another too hard, what happens? Well, the puppy that got bitten yelps and then ignores or shuns the puppy that bit him. In effect, he is ignoring the "bad behavior". When he doesn't bite too hard, he is engaged in play and this appropriate behavior is rewarded. So, to teach puppies bite inhibition, we must do the same thing. If puppy starts biting while playing, say "OUCH!!!" Then shun him for a moment. Praise the puppy when he stops biting and resume play. Repeat the "OUCH!!!" command to eliminate biting by working in the following order: 1. No hard bites, 2. No pressure at all, 3. Mouthing is okay until owner says to stop. The ultimate goal is for the puppy to never initiate mouthing as he grows into a dog. For retrievers and other breeds that are obsessed with carry things in their mouths, keeping chew toys available to insert in their mouths

(rather than your hands) is advisable. For a quick demo, [view this video: bite inhibition](#). Note how the handler says OUCH and then turns his body and attention away from the puppy. The puppy seems surprised! He will quickly learn that mouthing is not the way to get the human's attention that he so wants! Note that there is no need to scold the puppy - he understood the message, and with a little consistency, he will learn that in order to keep his person's attention, he must not put his teeth on him! ☺

**18) Q: Any suggestions for a dog that may have been in the shelter too long and when out in the play area, won't engage with people, treats or toys - just works the perimeter sniffing and marking?**

A: This makes me very sad to hear about this dog. He needs to be evaluated for kennel stress. Dogs with kennel stress may show a range of behaviors, including cowering, pacing or other signs of anxiety, withdrawal from physical activity and/or social contact, aggression, and abnormal repetitive movements (like spinning or wall rebounding) among others. Chronic kennel stress does not resolve as long as the dog remains in the shelter, and the longer he remains, the more long term emotional damage he may carry with him. The very best thing to do is to get the dog out of the shelter and into a more normal environment - into a home where he can connect with people and be a dog again.

**19) Q: If you try to have them catch the food, could they choke on it while catching it?**

A: In 25 years of veterinary practice, this is not something that I have seen. Anything is possible of course, but I would not hesitate to play the game of catch with a healthy dog. Now, if a dog had a serious health issue such as laryngeal paralysis that would predispose him to aspiration or choking, then I would not advise this game. Fortunately, this would be a rare instance. Remember, everything in life carries risks and benefits. A dog could sustain an injury from playing fetch, or a puppy could have a life threatening reaction to a parvovirus vaccine - but the benefits of playing and of vaccination against parvovirus FAR, FAR exceed any such risks. Playing catch is much the same - low risk, HIGH benefit. It is fun, simple, practical game for dogs that anyone can play with virtually any dog anywhere with no space or equipment - this is a great, simple game - and dogs love it! It taps into something that is natural and fun for them to do!

**20) Q: Do all dogs have the potential to play or is it normal for some dogs to be really mellow?**

A: Yes, playing is a normal, natural behavior. Dogs vary by personality and it is certainly easier to teach a puppy to play than an adult dog in many instances, but the investment in time to teach a dog to play is well worth it... it lifts the emotions, busts stress and promotes positive associations. Some may be more playful than others, but I would hope that all dogs are able to engage in play, we ALL need some PLAY TIME!

**21) Q: Is any of the play done on leash?**

A: Yes, many of the games can be played on leashes or long lines - handler's preference.