



Do dogs need to play with other dogs in order to be well-socialized?

Dogs do love to play! There is nothing more fun than watching your 4-legged baby play with other canine friends at the dog park or hear all about your baby's play with other dogs while at the dog day care or boarding facility.

Is play with other dogs always a good thing? Do dogs need to freely play with other dogs in order to socialize? Well - yes and no. Unfortunately, sometimes play can reinforce bad behavior.

Let's start by defining and clarifying some things.

- The definition of **socialization** is: the process of forming intra and inter species attachment bonds. Intra-species is with other dogs and inter-species is with other animals such as cats, horses, pigs, rabbits, etc.
- What is an **attachment bond**: a close, personal relationship between two individuals. When we speak about socializing dogs with other dogs it means so much more than that?
- Let's look at **acclimation**: to adapt to a new situation. This is a very important skill!
- Habituate means: to get used to something.
- And finally, **resilience**: the ability to recover from and adapt easily to conflict and change.
- Dogs need socialization, habituation, and acclimation which we like to call "**Controlled Exposure Training**". We want to guide and control every aspect of our dog's experiences.

What this means is that we want to guide puppies and young dogs in their experiences to ensure that they are learning adaptability and resilience. We want our dogs to be well-mannered and fail-safe!

Puppies have an ideal time frame (which is generally up until 6 months of age) in which they are receptive to this guidance. Puppies are blank slates for learning. So where does this leave dogs older than 6 months? Our dogs need our guidance throughout their lives! The catch is that the older they are, the harder adaptation is because they are comparing new learning to old learning. As pet parents, we must continuously take an active role in guiding our pet's experiences and behavior.

So where does play with other dogs fit into all of this? Let's look at what play is and what dogs learn from play? Play is practice or rehearsal for skills needed later in life. Early in our domesticated dog's evolution, play was about learning hunting skills. Animals needed to learn how to outwit their prey, how to maintain control, and how to not lose a competition!

Nowadays our little princes and princesses don't need to learn how to hunt to eat or outwit predators to stay alive. Instead, they hunt their toys while playing chase and play wrestling games for strength, dexterity, and agility. Dogs learn how to maintain control over their body and their possessions by playing flirty 'you can't catch me' games with their human families as well as their canine companions. Just think for a moment how many skills are involved with play! Many of these games can be frustrating to owners though it is a natural part of their maturation and development! (Try to get your dog to "drop it" and then "come" in the middle of a lively game of "come and get it from me.")

So how can play with other dogs be bad? Believe it or not, all play between dogs is NOT nice and cooperative. Dogs are genetically finely tuned predators and they want to win at these games. Many dogs learn to bully, play unfairly, victimize other dogs, and even get confused with their own predatory instincts!

Play is addictive and frequently leads to impulsive behavior. It fails to teach dogs how to read signals. It teaches dogs how to get what they want! Some experts say that play teaches dogs how to relate with another dog's experience. The assumption is that when a puppy or dog cries out because the play is too rough, play stops. The offending dog then learns it isn't fun when play stops, so the play is remediated. But that isn't the pattern of behavior that occurs. A cry out or a retreat from play may work the first few times because it is a novel experience. But quickly, the playing dog ignores the cry out and pursues the retreating dog.

Let's face it – play is far more fun when the dog is in charge, so the play becomes more opportunistic and bully-like. Play doesn't teach gentling skills. Play teaches clever behavioral adaptations about how to maintain control and get what the dog wants. Play also leads to the addictive behavior of wanting to approach every dog he sees in order to play. This leads to leash pulling and 'friendly' lunging toward other dogs when on leash. Then once he finally gets to the dog, he pummels and tackles the other dog in play rather than greeting and negotiating a polite interaction. Quickly, these dogs are unable to simply exist neutrally around other dogs. They just want to play with everyone! This can lead to frustration. Frustration leads to anger. Anger leads to aggression. Not because your dog is truly aggressive, but because your dog hasn't learned proper socialization coupled with impulse control training.

Dogs don't learn empathy the way children do. By age 5 we should be teaching children how to empathize with others. We teach children how to understand feelings and how to have a moral identity. Dogs just aren't capable of that. They are self-serving opportunists, often trying to get the advantage. Just like toddlers!

Good dog play includes space between the dogs; pause in the play for drinks, bathroom breaks, and wet dog shakes; role reversals; and a minimal amount of wrestling or body contact. Competitive and possibly inappropriate play includes primarily wrestling, biting

and pulling, take downs, body slamming and rolling other dogs, playing to win, playing at another dog's expense, etc.

If your dog plays inappropriately, you should reconsider his ability to play freely with other dogs which will only reinforce this behavior. Remember, we cannot train a dog to be empathetic and consider another dog's feelings. While there are a few dogs that will gentle themselves in play with other dogs - most do not. If your dog plays inappropriately, he cannot be taught to be a gentle, considerate player. If your dog plays inappropriately with other dogs, you should try to pair or expose your dog to either higher ranking dogs that won't allow that sort of interaction or with other dogs that don't prefer to play or wrestle.

Inappropriate players should not continue to go to dog parks or dog day cares no matter how much fun they seem to have! If that dog is playing inappropriately there will definitely be a victim of that play who may learn to become defensively aggressive as an adaptation of their experience with an inappropriate player.

Dogs need to learn that they cannot visit themselves on all dogs and that not all dogs want to play. The best inter-dog situation for an inappropriate player is to be with another dog that causes them to think and exercise impulse control.

When we think that dogs need to play and socialize with other dogs, what they really need is exercise! Depending on their breed – dogs need at least an hour's worth of aerobic exercise a day. This includes anything that gets their heart rate up and exercises their muscles. Daily exercise doesn't need to occur all at one time but the amount of activity they receive each day should total at least an hour. This can include brisk walks, runs, dog sports, fetch, play with another dog, toy play, swimming, running and playing in the back yard, etc.

Often, when dogs aren't good with other dogs, owners are told to get out and socialize that dog. It may be true that you can work on finding a buddy for that dog by looking for another dog with whom he can form a safe and appropriate attachment bond. This does not mean to take your dog around other dogs to interact, go to the dog park, or get him into a dog day care. There are some dogs that will never be appropriately socialized with other dogs. These same dogs may be able to acclimate to the presence of other dogs and learn to walk neutrally with dogs nearby. Some dogs are just not comfortable in a multiple dog situation but can have limited, successful interactions with a couple of other familiar dogs. Finally, there are some dogs who are simply unable to tolerate the presence of other dogs. These dogs still need exercise and must be accommodated as best as possible through training, management, and brain games/enrichment to help them manage the anxiety brought on by the presence or interaction of other dogs.

Dogs need to play, that's for sure! But we don't want to reinforce inappropriate play with other dogs. And we don't want to force dogs to be with other dogs when that is not what

they want. There are other activities in which you and your dog can participate and other ways for dogs to get exercise. Dogs should learn to be tolerant and well-mannered with other dogs which may or may not include playing with other dogs. Dogs do not need to greet every dog they see when out for a walk as a part of socialization. Leashed interactions are often frustrating for dogs! Ideally, dogs should learn that they may play with some dogs; should walk past other dogs; greet but not play with others; and just leave some dogs alone. Dogs should learn to have many different relationships and interactions with other dogs.