

PROTOCOL FOR TEACHING KIDS—AND ADULTS—TO PLAY WITH DOGS AND CATS

One reason why we have pets is so that we can cuddle and play with them. Such interactions should be the source of much joy, but they often lead to injury to the pet or the person. Rough play can also worsen a behavioral problem that is developing. Some basic guidelines on how to appropriately play with cats and dogs can minimize these problems while leading people to more fully appreciate the intricacies of canine and feline communication.

Puppies and kittens, like young children, are energetic, can quickly progress to out-of-control and exhausted play, and make mistakes in both the objects and the intensity of their play behaviors. Unlike human children, puppies and kittens do not have hands with opposable thumbs (a purely primate trait). Instead, they have a jaw and tooth structure that allows them to carry and manipulate a variety of objects. Hence, much play between young cats and dogs involves the use of the mouth. Kittens and puppies will box and rear and pounce on each other as part of play. They will transfer these behaviors to people unchanged.

Boxing, Mounting, Rearing, and Pouncing

Boxing, mounting, rearing, and pouncing are normal kitten and puppy behaviors. These behaviors function to allow closeness and energetic play between animals, and may help to shape adult social behaviors and communication skills.

By their second month of life, both puppies and kittens will begin to pay a lot of attention to humans and will use the same behaviors that they use to communicate with other animals to communicate with humans. All social mammals play and so we are able to recognize signals from puppies and kittens that they wish to play and to act on these impulses.

Human children do not exhibit exactly the same form of play that puppies and kittens do, in part, because humans can manipulate objects and each other with their hands. The tendency is for puppies and kittens to play with humans exactly as they would play with other puppies and kittens, and for humans to mimic the puppy and kitten behaviors using their hands.

When dogs and cats are little and do not weigh much these wrestling and boxing behaviors tend to be non-injurious to people. As the animal grows, the pouncing and boxing can injure a child, or, in the case of a large-breed dog, an adult human. Very exuberant, large-breed dogs can knock a human toddler to the ground and fracture the toddler's skull. Tragic deaths and injuries are no less tragic because the animal "didn't mean to do it." In fact, accidental injury to a child caused by an animal who is wonderful will cause more guilt for the humans involved than will injury by a dangerous animal. Appropriate play behavior minimizes the risk of injury.

Puppies and kittens remain youngsters until they are socially mature beginning at around 2 years of age. Accordingly, they cannot be expected to show the judgment and restraint that an older dog or cat might. It is impossible to know whether a dog or cat understands how fragile infants, young children, or aged, frail humans can be. It is absolutely unfair to make the puppy or kitten solely responsible for the decisions about the directions that play will take. Guidance needs to be provided by you, the responsible human.

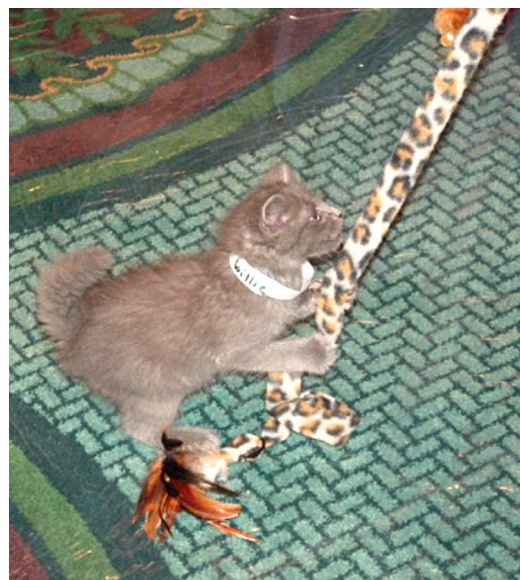
Tackling, pawing, mounting, et cetera by young animals **can be** acceptable if and only if you can (a) always stop the



Scratches due to an exuberant greeting of an 11-month-old rescue dog who uses his paws to grab at people and who was relinquished because he was "too much dog for a family with kids."

behavior by saying "no" or by withdrawing, (b) redirect the behavior to another focus, like a toy, and (c) gently change the behavior so that it decreases in the future, should the behavior be too rough.

If the animal's response to a gentle "correction" of standing up or withdrawal of your leg is to attack more forcefully, **a serious problem already exists and you need to talk to your veterinarian.** Either the animal is already displacing some undesirable tendencies related to aggression and control, or the cat or dog has been taught or encouraged to play too roughly. Appropriate correction for forceful tackles or pouncing includes stopping, saying "no," redirecting the animal's attention to a toy, and asking the cat or dog to exhibit a more appropriate behavior. Preferred behaviors include sitting and waiting for a toy, or being redirected to pounce on a preferred object (e.g., a feather on a string for the cat who lurks around corners and chases feet, shoes, or shoe laces).



This toy provides the perfect outlet for "tackling" by this rescue kitten.

You should not “correct” animals by swatting them in the face or thumping them on the rump. This will only encourage them to play more roughly or to be frightened. This is **not** the message you need to send.

You also should refrain from exhibiting what too many humans think of as human versions of feline or canine “correctional” behaviors. These include hanging a kitten by its scruff; rolling a dog over forcefully and lying on it while growling in its face; shaking a dog by the jowls, scruff, or neck; swatting a dog across the ears; slapping a dog under the chin, et cetera.

- First, these behaviors are not exact mimics of behaviors that adult dogs and cats use to control play that is too rough in puppies and kittens.
- Second, even to the extent that these behaviors overlap with how a normal dog or cat may respond, there is a real danger in over-doing them and causing the pet injury. This is particularly true for cats. Cats are tiny, and although adult cats frequently bite at or carry young cats by the nape of the neck, cats also have pressure sensors under their teeth and can use just the right amount of control. People don’t have this ability and could injure or scare the cat.
- Finally, these forceful kinds of correctional behaviors exhibited by humans towards their pets may encourage physical solutions for problems which are better solved using intellectual solutions. We shouldn’t have to man-handle a cat or dog to convince them to alter their behavior; we should be smart enough to change their behavior in ways that can be mutually satisfying. The best emotional relationships with our pets are founded on a basis that is devoid of fear and injury. We need to protect both our children and our pets so that they can have those relationships.



Normal play between an adult dog and a young puppy, using a toy. Note that the puppy determines how hard the play will be and that the toy chosen by the adult dog is very large compared to the puppy’s mouth. Together, these strategies—which humans can mimic—keep both the puppy and the adult safe and happy.

One final comment on physical discipline and pets is warranted. Not only will physical discipline cause the animal to respond by increasing their potentially aggressive responses, but it will send the message to any other individuals watching (i.e., your children, friends, or spouse) that the way you



The puppy in the previous photo is shown as an adult, using the same techniques that were used for him on a new puppy in the household. All of the Australian shepherds pictured in this handout are happy rescue dogs.

solve conflicts is through physical intervention and violence. Ask yourself if this is the message that you wish to send. The American Humane Association (AHA), the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), and the Latham Foundation have all demonstrated that **child abuse and pet abuse are linked**. People who are abused as children will hone their abuse skills on their pets before then continuing the cycle by abusing their own children. In turn, pets who are abused may act as a flag for child abuse. The concepts of abuse and discipline are changing as we learn more about ourselves and our pets. Harsh punishment of our pets may act as guides to other problems that we have not previously understood.

That said, recent research shows that people who are best able to play and signal as dogs and cats would have the best relationship with their pets and report few behavioral complaints. By allowing our pets to teach us how to better play and communicate with them we engender better relationships.

Claws and Scratching

Kittens are not able to reliably retract their claws prior to 4 weeks of age, but can learn to do so after that. If they are allowed to snag at humans using their claws, they will continue to do so as adults. Cat scratch disease (CSD) is a serious problem for people who have been scratched by cats. Most of the cats who communicate this bacterial disease are young kittens infested with fleas, but any cat can potentially transmit CSD. Cat bites are a serious problem in human health because cats’ teeth are curved, small, and sharp. A cat bite provides the ideal environment for infection.

Kittens who are hand- or bottle-reared will play more roughly with both their claws and teeth than will those who have been naturally weaned by and kept with their mothers. This is because their mothers and other siblings will not tolerate overly rough play. Early correction as the kitten begins to get bigger is invaluable and involves not just the tendency to modulate or control rough behaviors, but also the ability to use signals that communicate when the play is getting too rough. That “early correction” is best coming from another cat. This is why we recommend that kittens stay with their

mothers as long as possible. If they can be kept with their mothers until 9 to 14 weeks of age, she will monitor all the play and the kittens won't learn to play roughly. Part of the problem with bottle-fed or orphaned kittens is that they may not learn to inhibit their aggression using either their claws or teeth because there is no adult present who can read the early signals that the play is rougher than needed. Fortunately, the adult cat who raises the kitten needn't be the mother. If you have an early orphaned kitten please try to find a caring, normal older cat—male or female—who is good with kittens and is nurturing and can help the kittens play more gently. These cats are not rare, and even a few hours of exposure a day may make a difference.

A second part of the problem has to do with social development and the evolution of cat behavior: cats who are weaned early exhibit predatory behavior earlier than do cats who are allowed to spend extended amounts of time with their mothers and siblings. Clients who take on these orphaned kitties need to be realistic and to learn to read their kitten's signals well: no rough play should be tolerated, toys should always be substituted for swatting at people, "corrections" should include distractions (like a whistle) followed by a substitute focus (e.g., a toy), and if the cat persists in her aggressive behavior, that cat should be abandoned unceremoniously or dumped from the client's lap (just stand up and let the cat fall off; do not dangle any body parts in front of the cat) and ignored until she has calmed down. Be aware that some cats arouse easily and may require 24 to 48 hours to calm. Once the cat has become calm, play can be reintroduced using a toy.



Play with a rescue kitten using a toy and a hemp scratching post. Notice that this cat is very physical in the use of his paws and claws and that this mode of play keeps everyone safe, while encouraging the kitten to use his claws on the scratching post.

Claw use is less of an issue for clients with dogs, but this can still be problematic for dogs that bat and swat with their feet. These dogs do well with Kong toys, Buster Cubes, Boomer Balls, Planet Toys, et cetera, that redirect their foreleg movements to something that will not be injured. Caution is urged: Dogs in hot pursuit of a toy can knock over another animal, a child, or small human adult without realizing that they have done so or that they caused injury. Appropriate supervision is always necessary.

Finally, keeping any dog's or cat's nails trimmed should be mandatory. Nail trims become easier for both pet and

human with practice. Clients should start to trim nails as soon as they get their pet. Even if the nails do not need trimming clients should routinely handle the feet of all dogs, cats, puppies, and kittens. Nail care will get easier with time, render the pet easier to handle, and make it safer and more comfortable for the pet to run, and for the person to interact with the pet. Furthermore, if puppies and kittens learn to tolerate such care early and then begin to resist, clients have an early warning sign that there is a problem and they can seek help before a huge behavioral crisis arises. If you dislike trimming your cat's or dog's claws, please consult a good dog trainer who uses only positive and humane techniques to teach you how to condition your dog or cat to "file" his own nails on sandpaper boards.



One of a series of new nail clipper designs that makes it easier and safer to trim your cat's and dog's nails frequently. Kittens and puppies who have their nails painlessly trimmed frequently become very easy to handle.



This adult dog has been taught to offer his paw for nail trims. If puppies and kittens are taught to offer their feet for care, they are very easy to work with as adults.

Mouthing and Biting

Mouthing and biting are common complaints of people who have, inadvertently, played too roughly with their dog

or cats. **No puppy or kitten should be encouraged to mouth.** Puppies and kittens will “mouth” naturally because they use their mouths much as we use hands. It is a simple matter to abort this behavior when it is first starting, but mouthing can be tremendously difficult to stop if it has been ongoing for a long time.

- The first thing you need to do when your puppy or kitten mouths you is to gently say “no” and freeze. If you pull your hand away from the puppy or kitten, even if you are doing so to avoid a prick, you are encouraging him to pursue the “game.”
- Softly say “no” to signal that the interaction is stopping, stop, and then gently extricate or remove your body part while gently holding the puppy’s or kitten’s body.
- Then quickly offer something on which your pet can safely chew or chase (e.g., a stuffed toy, a ball, a feather on a string) and tell your dog or cat that she is good. When puppies or kittens play with toys that you hold they may mouth you again. Be prepared to redirect the mouthing back to the toy and repeat this as often as necessary.
- If your kitten or puppy persists, you can make a sharp noise (e.g., a whistle) as a distraction. Remember that the only reason that you wish to distract him is so that the behavior stops. *You do not have to scare the dog or cat to get them to stop mouthing. If you scared your pet, then the behavior you used to interrupt her was inappropriate or the timing was wrong.*
- As soon as the undesirable behavior stops you need to encourage an appropriate behavior. In the absence of this information, the puppy or kitten will again offer mouthing or more intense behaviors like biting to learn if these are the behaviors that will get you to interact with them. *Puppies and kittens are asking for information: you provide information when you respond to their behaviors.*
- Stopping the behavior is important. **It is equally important to REWARD the cessation of the undesirable behavior with a behavior that is fun, but more appropriate (i.e., chewing on a toy).**
- Remember that puppies and kittens are hugely energetic and will tire the average human almost instantly. You have to be vigilant. If you are not willing to be vigilant, consider placing the puppy or kitten in a safe area (his own room, a crate, a pen) with a safe chew or food toy until you feel that you have the energy again to face the onslaught of play.
- If you don’t feel like you can honestly face this type of activity day after day, please consider whether a pet sitter or dog walker can help. Perhaps a responsible child in your neighborhood is not allowed to have a pet but might be happy to learn to play appropriately with your puppy or kitten and wear them out. Children can be excellent at teaching pets tricks.
- The bottom line is that puppies and kittens need lots of exercise and mental stimulation. Both of these activities can be geared to teaching them safe, socially acceptable behaviors.

Puppies and kittens need energetic, positive attention. If they are not able to get attention through positive means, they will get it through ones you will consider negative. You are responsible for shaping your pet’s behavior. Young puppies and kittens are just like young children: If the only interaction they get is negative, they will still learn to crave negative attention, and will learn to intensify the negative behaviors to get ever increasing amounts of response.



A rescue kitten playing appropriately with a human and toy, and demonstrating one of the skills characteristic of kittens—climbing!

People often feel that they do not have to manage puppy nipping and mouthing because it is not injurious and does not hurt. **This is absolutely incorrect.** These dogs are going to get bigger: the bigger the dog, the more powerful the jaws, and the more damage that the dog will do if he bites. The time to help your dog learn to not mouth and nip humans is when the dog is young. If your dog is allowed to “mouth,” he will learn that this is an acceptable way to interact with people. It is much harder to unlearn a behavior than to teach an appropriate one at the beginning.

People (often adult human males) often feel that they can teach their dogs to be protective by wrestling with them. This is anthropomorphic, wrong, and dangerous. If a dog is going to protect you or your family when a threat is present, he will do so regardless of whether or not he plays roughly. The only thing that this kind of “training” will accomplish is to teach your dog to treat you roughly. This is not what you want. If you want to help your dog to avoid mistakes in grabbing people during play, use dog toys 4 times larger than the dog’s mouth and 2 times larger than the dog’s head. Even if the dog has lousy aim, this size difference makes it tough for dogs to mistake human body parts for toys.

Some puppies who are raised with other energetic dogs can play very roughly. Dogs of all ages can learn to distinguish between rough play between dogs and more gentle play with people. One of their first clues is that you do not use your mouth to grab the ruff of their neck. Do not tolerate rough play from your puppy or kitten just because you assume that this is the way the puppy or kitten plays with your other pets. As long as none of the animals in the house is becoming injured in their energetic play, they can play as roughly as they want with each other, but must be encouraged through the use of interruptions, toy substitution, and ignoring them that this same quality of play will not be tolerated by you or other humans.



The importance of toy size is shown here where this Jack Russell both ingests and protects toys. The toy needs to be large enough to safely retrieve.



Rough play between two well-matched dogs. Note that the toy, while at the lower end of the recommended size range, is big enough that the 11-month-old puppy (the red dog) can play tug safely with the older dog (the blue merle). The older dog is allowing the younger dog to decide how the game will be played.

If you have pets that vary widely in size, energy level, or judgment about how to play with younger or smaller pets, **you are responsible for supervising them.** Bigger pets can and do kill smaller ones by accident. Some older animals have problems with smaller ones and may exhibit predatory behavior toward them (see the **Protocol for Introducing a New Baby and a Pet**). It is not necessary that your pet be “problematic” for her to injure a younger or smaller puppy or kitten in play. Only when you are certain that the animals play well and safely together should they be left alone, and then only for short periods of time. If you think that your new puppy or kitten plays too roughly with you after playing with another pet, consider limiting her time together to short, supervised periods and working with her on leash or harness immediately after playing with the other pet.

Teaching Tug

Clients often want to play energetic tug with their pets. Many training manuals will tell you not to do so because doing so will make the pet aggressive. **This is not true.** If the goal is to play appropriately, energetically, and interactively, you can play tug with your pet **if you observe the following seven rules:**

1. The dog must sit and wait until you are ready to start the game and until you offer the toy. This way you are clear about the rules for starting a game and the signal that the activity is a game.
2. You must say “take it” and the dog will wait to take the toy until you give the request.
3. You and the dog both pull on the toy, you are gentle and don’t swing the dog around the room (which could injure its neck) and the dog is gentle and does not grab any of your body parts.
4. If the dog so much as grazes any of your body parts you act as if you are mortally wounded, stop the game, ask the dog to sit, or preferably lie down, be calm, and the dog complies.
5. You again offer the toy as in step 1, above.
6. You decide when the game is over by announcing that the game is “over” or “done.” The dog then sits and drops the toy into your waiting hand. This step provides a clear rule



A game of tug involving only dogs. The size of the toy they chose suggests that these young dogs (6 and 11 months) understand that tug requires objects both participants can easily manipulate.

for stopping. Remember, humane rules provide practical guidance and decrease anxiety and uncertainty.

7. You release the dog and he goes off to do something else without charging you.

If you cannot honestly execute all of the steps above flawlessly, you do not get to play tug. You and your pet will be safer for this.

Remember that dogs and cats—like humans—make mistakes. You cannot afford to lose your temper with an animal, particularly one that is a baby. Not only could you seriously injure a young pet by behaving irresponsibly, but you will set the tone for future interactions and could teach that dog or cat to be fearful, aggressive, or simply just too rough. Also, you damage trust, and recovery of trust is never easy.