

## B-26 PROTOCOL FOR TEACHING CHILDREN (AND ADULTS) TO PLAY WITH DOGS AND CATS

One of the reasons that 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 to the person. Rough play can worsen a behavioral problem that is developing. Some basic guidelines for appropriate play with cats and dogs can minimize these problems and may also lead people to more fully appreciate the intricacies of canine and feline communication.

Puppies and kittens, like young children, are energetic, can quickly progress to lack of control and exhaustion in their 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 also box, rear, and pounce on each other as part of play. Young animals 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 shape adult social behaviors and communication skills. By their second month of life, both puppies and kittens begin to pay more attention to people and use the same behaviors that they use to communicate with other animals to communicate with humans. All social mammals play, 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 these puppy and kitten behaviors using their hands.

When dogs and cats are small and do not weigh much, these wrestling and boxing behaviors tend to be noninjurious. However, 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 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 that is wonderful will cause more guilt for the humans involved than will injury by a dangerous animal. Puppies and kittens remain youngsters until they are socially mature, which occurs at around 2 years of age. Accordingly, they cannot be expected to show the judgment and restraint that an older dog or cat might. Furthermore, it is impossible to intellectually ascertain 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. Human guidance must be provided.

Tackling, pawing, and mounting by young animals can be acceptable *if and only if* the people involved can do the following: (1) always stop the behavior by saying no or by with-

drawing, (2) redirect the behavior to another focus (a toy), and (3) gently correct 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 withdrawing a leg is to attack it more forcefully, there is already a problem. Either the animal is already displacing some undesirable tendencies related to aggression and control, or the person has already taught the animal to play too roughly. Appropriate correction for forceful tackling or pouncing includes stopping, saying no, startling the animal (blowing in the animal's face may work), and asking the pet to exhibit a more appropriate behavior. More appropriate behavior may involve sitting and waiting for a toy or distracting the pounce to a better focal object (e.g., a feather on a string for the cat that lurks around corners and chases shoelaces).

People should not correct animals by swatting them in the face or by thumping them on the rump. This only stimulates the animals to respond to the body part that has just whacked them and teaches puppies and kittens that rough play stimulates rough play. This is not the message that people wish to send.

People should also refrain from exhibiting what they perceive to be human versions of feline or canine correctional behaviors. These including 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; and so on. First, these behaviors are not mimics of behaviors that adult dogs and cats exhibit toward puppies and kittens. Second, even to the extent that these behaviors do overlap with corrections of dog and cat behaviors, there is a real danger in overdoing 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 have pressure sensors under their teeth and can use just the right amount of control—people do not have this ability. Finally, these forceful kinds of correctional behaviors exhibited by people toward their pets may encourage physical solutions for problem that are better solved by intellectual solutions. People should not have to manhandle a cat or dog to convince the animal to alter its behavior—they should be smart enough to redirect that behavior in ways that can be mutually satisfying. Through evolutionary history, humans have lived with dogs and, to a lesser extent, cats in a manner that has encouraged them to take their cues from us. We can capitalize on that perception and learn to encourage limits to robust play. The best emotional relationships with 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.

One final comment on physical discipline and pets is warranted. Not only will physical discipline cause the animal to respond in an escalated and aggressive manner, but it will also send the message to any other individuals watching (i.e., your children, friends, or spouse) that the way you solve conflicts is through physical intervention and violence. Ask yourself if this is the message that you wish to send, especially given that the method does not appear to work as well as kinder, more benevolent methods. The American Humane Association and the Latham Foundation have demonstrated that child abuse and pet abuse are linked. People who are abused as children will hone their abuse skills on their pets before continuing the cycle by abusing their own children. In turn, pets that 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 a guide to other problems that we have not previously understood.

### Claws and Scratching

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

Kittens that are hand- or bottle-reared play more roughly with their claws and teeth than those who have been naturally weaned by and kept with their mothers. Their mothers and other siblings do not tolerate rough play and correct the cats. Early correction as the cat begins to get bigger is invaluable and involves not only the tendency to modulate or control rough behaviors, but also the ability to use signals that communicate when the play is getting too rough. For this and other reasons, kittens should be kept with their mothers until 9 to 14 weeks of age. The mother will control all the play, partly through her withdrawal from the kittens, and they will never learn to play roughly. Part of the problem with bottle-fed or orphaned kittens is that they never learn to inhibit their aggression using either their claws or their teeth because there is no adult present who can read the early signals that the play is rougher than needed. However, a second part of the problem involves social development and the evolution of cat behavior. Cats that are weaned early exhibit predatory behavior earlier than do cats that are allowed to spend extended amounts of time with their mothers and siblings. Clients who adopt these orphaned kittens must be realistic and learn to read their kitten's signals well: (1) no rough play should be tolerated, (2) toys should always be substituted for swatting at people, (3) corrections should include distractions (like blowing in the cat's face) followed by a substitution, and (4) if the cat pursues aggressive acts, the cat should be unceremoniously dumped from the client's lap (just stand up and let it fall off—do not dangle any body parts in front of an aggressive cat) and ignored until it has calmed down. Once the cat has become calm, play can be reintroduced with a toy. Clients must not encourage the direction of predatory behaviors toward themselves.

Claws are less of a consideration for clients with dogs but can still be problematic for dogs that bat and swat with their feet. These dogs do well with Kong toys or Boomer balls (Kong Co., Lakewood, CO) that redirect the dog's foreleg movements to something that will not be injured. Caution is urged: dogs in hot pursuit of a toy can knock over a child or small human and may not even realize that damage has been done. Appropriate supervision is always necessary.

Finally, keeping any dog's or cat's nails trimmed should be mandatory and part of routine maintenance. Clients can start this as soon as they get their pet. It will get easier with time, render their 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. If people are afraid to use nail clippers, emery boards can produce well-manicured dog and cat claws.

### 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 do this naturally because they use their mouths much as humans use hands. It is a simple matter to abort this behavior when it first starts, but it can be very difficult to abort it if it has been ongoing for a long time.

The first thing clients should do when their puppy or kitten mouths them is to say "no" and freeze. If clients pull their hand away from the puppy or kitten, even if doing so to avoid a prick, they encourage the animal to pursue the "game." Say "no," stop, and gently extricate or remove the body part while holding the body of the animal. Then *quickly* offer the animal something on which it can chew (a stuffed toy or a ball) and tell the dog or cat that it is good. Repeat this as often as necessary. If the animal persists, make a sharp noise, whistle, or blow in the animal's face to startle it. Remember, the only reason to startle the animal is to stop the behavior so that a more appropriate one can be taught. Most people understand that they wish the animal to stop the behavior and can get them to do that; however, it is equally important to reward the cessation of the undesirable behavior with one that is more appropriate (e.g., chewing on a toy). Remember, puppies and kittens are very focused and will exhaust the average person almost instantly. Clients must be vigilant and, if they are not willing to be so, should consider placing the animal in a safe area (its own room, a crate, or a pen) until they feel they have the energy again to face the onslaught of play. (If clients do not feel that they can honestly face this for days, they should reconsider why they have this pet.) Puppies and kittens need energetic, positive attention. If they are not able to get attention through positive means, they will get it through ones clients consider negative. Clients are responsible for shaping the pet's behavior. Young puppies and kittens are just like young children—if the only interaction they get is negative, they will learn to crave that negative interaction, and, like children, they will intensify the negative behaviors to get ever-increasing amounts of response.

Clients often think that they do not have to correct puppy nipping because it is not injurious and does not hurt. This is *absolutely incorrect*. These dogs will get bigger, the bigger the dog, the more powerful the jaws, and the more damage that the dog will do if it bites. The time to learn to inhibit activity using the mouth is when the dog is young. If dogs are allowed to mouth, they will form a behavioral habit in which mouthing is acceptable. It is much harder to unlearn a behavior than to teach an appropriate one at the beginning.

People (often adult human males) often believe 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 a family when a threat is present, they will do so regardless of whether they play roughly. All such "training" does is to teach the dog to treat the family roughly. This is not what clients want. Clients should use a toy, not their arm! Using a toy for real play helps a dog understand the contextual differences between play and threat. Dogs need this help, which is easy to provide.

Some puppies that 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 the first clues that puppies can use is that the clients do not use their mouth to grab the ruff of

their neck. Clients should not tolerate rough play from a puppy or kitten because they assume that this is the way to play with other pets. As long as none of the animals in the house is injured during energetic play, they can play as roughly as they want with each other but must be encouraged through the use of corrections, toy substitution, and withdrawal of attention that this same quality of play will *not* be tolerated from the clients. Clients can help the dog understand this. If clients' pets vary widely in size or in skills related to judgment about how hard to play with youngsters, the clients are responsible for supervising the pets. 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 "Protocol for the Introduction of a New Pet to Other Household Pets"). It is not necessary that the pet have this problem for the animal to injure a younger or smaller puppy or kitten in play. Only when clients are certain that the animals play well and safely together should they be left alone, and then only for short periods of time. If a new puppy or kitten plays too roughly with people after playing with another pet, consider limiting their time together to short, supervised periods and working with the puppy or kitten on a leash or harness immediately after play with the other pet.

### Teaching Tug

Clients often want to play an energetic game of tug with their pets. Many training manuals state not to do so because it will make the pet aggressive. This is not true. If the goal is

to play appropriately, energetically, and interactively, clients can play tug with a pet if the following rules are observed:

1. The dog must sit and wait until the client is ready to start the game and until the toy is offered.
2. Clients must say "take it," and the dog must wait to take the toy until the request.
3. The client and the dog both pull on the toy, and the tugging is gentle and does not swing the dog around the room (which could injure its neck), and the dog is gentle and does not grab any body parts.
4. If the dog simply grazes any body parts, the client should act as if mortally wounded, stop the game, ask the dog to sit or, preferably, lie down, and the dog complies.
5. Again offer the toy as in Step 1.
6. The client decides when the game is over by announcing that it is time to stop ("stop," "enough," "that is it"), the dog sits ("sit"), and drops the toy into the client's waiting hand ("drop it"), and the client always wins.
7. The client releases the dog and it goes off to do something else without charging.

If all of these steps cannot be executed flawlessly, do not play tug. The client and the pet will be safer.

Do not forget, similar games can be taught to cats!

Remember, dogs and cats, like people, make mistakes. Clients must not lose their temper with an animal, particularly one that is a baby. Not only could a young pet be seriously injured by such irresponsibility, but also it sets the tone for future interactions and could teach that dog or cat to be fearful, aggressive, or simply to play too roughly.