

Play As Behavior Therapy
Daniel Estep, Ph.D. and Suzanne Hetts, Ph.D.
www.AnimalBehaviorAssociates.com
Copyright ABA, Inc.

Joanne has a four-month old Labrador retriever named Sammy that jumps up on her and her children, nips at their clothes and barks and runs at them constantly. An evaluation of Sammy revealed that he wasn't being purposefully aggressive – he was just out of control in his play with them. We see many dogs like Sammy that don't seem to know how to control themselves around people. It seems that what Sammy and these other dogs need is to learn how to play!

This is not as strange as it may seem. At a conference of applied animal behaviorists we attended last week, Karen London, Ph.D. of Dog's Best Friend, Black Earth, Wisconsin, discussed the value of play as a part of the treatment for some problem dogs. She pointed out that play has many benefits for animals including providing physical and mental exercise, teaching basic manners, teaching dogs how to pay attention to people and teaching boundaries for their behavior. By teaching dogs how to play appropriately, they can learn important lessons that can carry over to non-play situations such as basic manners and boundaries in interacting with people. Joanne can teach Sammy not to mouth and nip at people, not to jump up or to launch himself at people and not to steal things that aren't given to him by teaching him specific games that promote appropriate behavior and discourage inappropriate behavior.

Dogs can be taught not only how to play but also when to play and who to play with. Joanne can work with Sammy to teach him specific signals that tell him when he can play with the family and when play is finished. She can also work with Sammy and the children to teach them games that are appropriate for them and to teach Sammy the rules for playing with children. These rules will need to be different than those for playing with larger adults. In some households with small children and very physical dogs, it may be that play between the children and dog should not happen at all until the children are older and the dog is better behaved.

Dogs can be taught a variety of social games such as fetching a ball or object, hide and seek, finding a hidden treat, and finding and bringing a specific toy or object. Each type of play has its own value and benefits. Dogs can be taught and encouraged to play with other dogs or even with other animals in the household such as cats, as long as limits and boundaries are taught as well. Dogs also should be taught how to play by themselves. They can be encouraged to toss and catch balls or other toys, or to play with puzzle toys such as objects that contain food treats. Play not only enriches our lives with our dogs but can be used as a way to help deal with problem behaviors.