

Chapter 13: The Role of Play Behavior
Taken from: Aggression In Dogs by Brenda Aloff
Provided to FORDOG by Sacramento SPCA



One important vehicle from which puppies learn is engaging in play behavior with other dogs. Thus they learn when a situation is truly threatening and when it is not. Playing with several dogs allows them the opportunity to learn that not all dogs have the same exact display and signals, which is how a dog becomes sophisticated with native language. This makes for a dog who does not get into trouble; in fact, it is hard to get this dog into trouble because he does not overreact to other dogs. Therefore, allowing a puppy to play with other dogs is a way to prevent aggressive behavior later on in life. Understanding play behavior, and how it relates to aggression, will help you become a more proactive trainer who can assess a dog's behavior and head trouble off at an early stage.

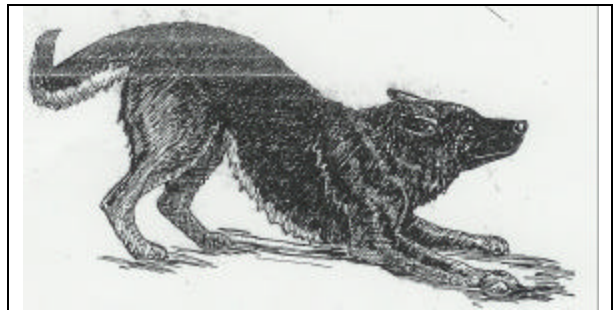
Common play behavior in dogs includes many of the same behaviors you would see in a "for real" physical confrontation. Play with littermates is how dogs learn when and how to use appropriate display to resolve conflicts and avoid aggression. Dogs in play are practicing their fluency in language so they can become good communicators and avoid aggression. One of the best things you can do for your dog is to make sure she is playing with dogs who use sophisticated, or at least normal, language. Dogs will learn by mimicry – copying the behavior of conspecifics. A dog who is fluent and sophisticated in his own language can teach your dog to be polite, social, and confident!

A Play Behavior List might include the following:

- Stalk, Chase
- Bared teeth
- Ambush
- T Position (head over the shoulders of the other dog)
- Shoulder/hip slams
- Circling and pushing
- Boxing or sparring

- Attacking
- Mounting with or without pelvic thrust
- Biting littermates' face, head, neck area
- Ears very erect or very flattened
- Growling vocalizations

The same list may be used for agonistic behavior signals. How does a dog know the difference? One way is through the use of displays that have a non-aggressive intent. If a dog "Play Bows," it seems to mean, "The behavior that follows this is not 'real' aggression, there is no intent to harm." If the play gets too rough, or escalates into a situation that one member finds uncomfortable, you will see the "uncomfortable" animal use calming signals (some specific out-of-context behaviors), such as sniffing, to signal non-aggression. These can be used as an invitation for the other dog to send a calming signal back as reassurance that "this is still play."



The classic "I am playing, I am non-aggressive, I want to be your friend" Play Bow. Depending on context, this might also Signal: "I acknowledge your Rank." The lowered ears and slightly lowered tail show me that this dog is signaling submission, at least temporarily, until she has gathered more information about the person or dog she is engaging with. The other possibility is that she is intentionally appearing to be submissive to encourage a timid dog to interact with here.

PLAY BOW

When I visited Wolf Park to observe the wolves, I was fascinated by the fact that, to the handlers there, a similar behavior to the one above is often referred to as a "Prey Bow." The wolves will use this behavior in front of large prey animals (e.g., bison) to "test" them and see if it will "move" the prey or cause some other response. Once the prey animal is moving, the wolf can better assess whether this is a good target animal. The prey animal will often face the wolf and wait for the wolf to move away. Then the wolf adopts a crouch similar to that observed in Border Collies when they are eyeing

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and moving sheep. Obviously, in a good Border Collie, the prey sequence has been truncated, whereas it has not been in the wolf!

My own dogs acknowledge *me*, as well as each other, with a specific, modified Play-Bow-type stretch. Sometimes they stretch with the fore quarters lowered, sometimes with the hind quarters stretched out behind them. Sometimes they do both. It is a way of saying “hello.” This is a friendly and related greeting generally used with *known* dogs and people.

When dogs are play bowing to each other, they have often given prior signals to let the other dog know that they are interested in initiating a prey game. Game and play are the key words here. If a dog is going to immediately make an unfriendly overture to another dog, I have never seen one use a play bow to do so. I have, however, seen my bitch Breanna USE a play bow specifically to intervene and dissipate the aggressive display of two of my boys when they were “facing off” – a posture that quickly escalates into violent interaction. Those boys were facing each other with hard eye contact and on tip-toe, and were just getting ready to shove each other with shoulders, no doubt to be quickly followed by grabbing each other with teeth. Breanna dashed in between them and play-bowed once to each boy. I was amazed to observe those boys immediately break eye-contact, shake (the stress off), and walk away in two separate directions. Breanna ran up to each boy separately and gave them a little lick and a friendly body wiggle and then went back and lay down in the dining room where she had been. Her behavior caused all tension to evaporate, and we all had a lovely, peaceful afternoon.

Consider the following scenario: two dogs approach, play bow, and commence play. After a few minutes, the play escalates, and becomes increasingly rough. Concurrent with this heightened intensity of behavior, one of the dogs suddenly breaks off play and begins to sniff the ground. This sniffing behavior is “Out-Of-Context” here, a calming signal, specifically used to communicate non-aggressive intent. You will likely see the play stop and become, at least temporarily, calmer. If the rough play continues to escalate, even with one member obviously signaling non-aggressive intent,

separate these two dogs, at least for a few minutes of “calm down” time. There is no need for one dog to practice being terrified and one dog to practice being overbearing or aggressive. I don’t know that I would ask them to play together again; it very much depends on the individuals and their histories.

It is imperative to know the difference between dogs who are playing and dogs who are Posturing. “Posturing” is a term I use to define that subtle moment when play behavior, or other “approach” behavior, begins to become something else: any behavior that indicates more reactivity. Pushy or overbearing behavior, or more body tension, indicates a dog who is no longer “playing,” but is beginning to feel crowded, threatened or insecure. Insecurity can be acted out as Assertive behaviors or Yielding behaviors, depending on the individual.

Think about it for a moment – secure people don’t run about telling everyone how “secure” they are. They are not wondering if they can cope. A certain type of insecure human personality will often come on a bit too strong, in an effort to compensate for the feeling that they cannot cope effectively with the situation. *Dogs who are not good communicators use gestures that are “too big.”* Instead of just walking up with an arced approach and sniffing, they will rush up and fling themselves on the ground, writhing and squirming at the other dog’s feet. My dogs greet such an animal with the attitude: “You can just say hello, you don’t have to overdo it!”

Other “too big” greeting behavior is evident when a dog approaches and pushes the other dog with her chest or puts her feet on the other dog’s shoulders. Two sophisticated dogs will approach using some form of arc and calmly sniff each other. A secure, self-confident dog tends to be relatively understated in her dealings with other dogs. Dogs in play who are both remaining in “play mode,” and are comfortable, will stay relaxed with each other over personal space.

Keep in mind the following descriptions are “typical,” but by no means complete, and in a slightly different context might mean something different. They will give you somewhere to begin as you are learning from your own observations. I have watched thousands of

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canids at play and have witnessed many altercations, from mild snipes to severe fights that would have culminated in death, had I not been there to intervene. Yet I learn something new from each group of dogs I see together.

INDICATIONS THAT DOGS ARE IN PLAY MODE

- If something else catches the dog's attention, he will look away from the other dogs, look at what caught his interest, then resume play. It is possible to test this by making a noise or commotion, running and clapping, walking in between the two dogs, or some other activity that might cause them to look around and see what else is going on in the environment. If they are difficult to interrupt, I would make it a POINT to do so. Reward the dogs for being interrupted, then allow them to resume play, watching them carefully for "too intense" behavior.
- You will customarily see the dogs changing "roles," switching from prey to predator. You will also see dogs who switch positions while "wrestling" – one is on top playing the aggressor, while the other dog is on the bottom. No matter the role or position, the dogs should exchange roles occasionally, whether chasing or wrestling.
- The dogs will both display relaxed facial expressions. If you can look at their eyes, the pupils are neither excessively dilated nor pin-pointed; they are normal for the amount of light in the environment. The dog's lips will be most likely to be drawn back toward their ears, rather than in the "C" shape that is illustrated in the "Distance Increasing Signals" chapter.
- Dogs in play can be quite noisy, although there is a lot of variability in noise level in dog play. A dog fight can be noisy also, but the timbre of the sound is different. When observing dogs playing and interacting, be alert to ANY changes in sounds. Did the vocalizations just become much louder? Are they changing from one kind of vocalization to another? Is it suddenly very quiet? Any changes in sounds may herald a change in the interaction between the dogs, so pay attention to these, and be ready to interrupt play.
- If one dog hurts the other by biting too roughly, Dog #2 can yip or squeal a little and

easily interrupt the dog who is being a bit too rough. It often happens very fluidly, just as if two humans were interacting and one of them plainly said, "Ouch! Be Careful!" The play may hardly be interrupted.

SIGNS OF TROUBLE AHEAD

- One dog cannot interrupt the other dog's advances easily (e.g., yielding attempts are not working), and becomes frightened. When dogs wrestle, this might be indicated by a more frantic struggle, with the aggressor holding on and not allowing the other dog up, even though that dog is beginning to show distress.
- There is facial tension, flaring whiskers, and/or sudden pupil dilation.
- One dog is ignoring calming signals that the other is giving.
- One dog is chasing and the "chasee" begins to display signs of alarm, such as lowering the tail and looking back in a worried manner, while the "chaser" begins to look more and more intent.
- It is not easy to interrupt the dogs' play, or get them to at least glance in your direction, with a loud startle noise or by yelling one dog's name in a pleasant tone of voice. If this IS the case, then you should intervene and make a decision about whether to allow the dogs to continue to interact.

CHOOSING PLAYMATES

While we are discussing play behaviors, I would like to re-emphasize how important it is to carefully choose your puppy's playmates. Just as you would choose nice children with nice manners and appropriate social skills to play with your children, ideally so would you choose appropriate puppies and dogs to teach your pet good language skills. Older dogs who are calm and non-reactive, or playful while keeping their social skills intact, are great choices, as are puppies who have similar activity preferences.

Before you allow your puppy or dog to play with another dog, test drive the possible playmate. Ask the dog's owner some questions:

- Has your dog played with other dogs or puppies before?
- Was your dog okay with the other dogs?

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- When your dog was playing with these other dogs, how old was your dog? (Remember how significant this can be. As a 6-month or 9-month-old pup, this dog may have approached other dogs totally differently than he does now as a 5-year-old adult.)
- How does your dog approach dogs he doesn't know?

If your dog is an older dog, and you are introducing her to another older dog, you might want the dogs to meet initially in a neutral area (neither dog's home territory). It is wise to leave the leashes on so you can get hold of the dogs if an altercation develops. Have a hose or bucket of water handy (many minor altercations can be broken up by using cold water tossed or sprayed on the dogs). If there is any doubt at all, have both dogs muzzled so everyone can remain safe if the situation deteriorates. *It is easier to remove muzzles and leashes if the dogs get along with each other than it is to remove the stitches that may result if they are not.*

For older dogs, especially if you are unsure of your dog or the other dog, opposite sex playmates are a good rule, although not a hard and fast one. Many dogs of the same sex will be amenable to each other, but serious fights rarely develop between males and females. The doozies are the same-sex fights. It is the male-to-male brawls and the notorious "bitch fights" that can be quite fierce, particularly if the parties involved are sexually intact.

From the older dog who does NOT want to play, your pup can learn not to bother those who do not wish to be bothered. This correction can look quite alarming to the uninitiated, but it is valuable for an uppity puppy to learn that he can't just irritate everyone into playing. An older dog may pin your puppy by holding him with her body and feet and vocalizing with growls. Sometimes until the puppy screeches and urinates. As long as the older dog is not biting hard or biting and shaking, this is a viable correction. After such a correction, there should never be a puncture wound. What you see afterwards from a puppy who has learned from his experience is an immediate apology. This is directed toward the older dog in the form of muzzle licking, lowered body posture and ear carriage accompanied by a lowered and wagging tail. Then you might see the older dog

initiate play with the upstart or just walk away from the puppy. Once an adult has pinned a puppy, a glance is usually enough to tone the youngster down.

I do not allow frequent, excessive corrections to puppies by other dogs. If the older dog is pinning the puppy immediately without first "asking" the puppy to go away with some lesser displays, that is inappropriate behavior by the older dog. (Remember "asking" might be an extremely subtle behavior, such as pointedly ignoring or avoiding the puppy.) If the older dog is *constantly* correcting the pup at random, I also discourage that.

PUPPY PLAY-GROUPS

Having several puppies together is a wonderful experience for them, such as happens at a puppy play session or a puppy k class. Here, several puppies, 6 months and younger, can interact in a totally juvenile manner, and the risk is small because the puppies are small. In our classes, we mix puppies of like tendencies. That is, we split the groups into 2 categories:

- The Chess Players: The quieter, cautious pups who are not physically "rough" with each other and prefer chasing or just walking around together, with some mild wrestling and gentle body contact.
- The Graffiti Painters: Those puppies who you just know would paint the town red if given the opportunity. The boisterous, rough and tumble puppies, the ones who were born to play Australian Football or rugby. Watch your knees when supervising this group!

Some rules for puppy play-groups: At first, NO toys or food on the floor. To be safe, this is a good rule for any group of dogs or puppies who don't know each other well. If all is going well, you can put SEVERAL TOYS out on the floor. I make sure there are 2 or 3 fuzzy toys, 2 or 3 rope toys, etc., with the number of toys exceeding the number of puppies. NEVER use any food, raw bones, or other high-value, volatile food-related items. Save Buster Cubes™ and other high value toys for individual play and omit them from group play. For my dog, Zasu, the Wiggly-Giggly Ball™ is taboo in a group; she immediately begins object-guarding behaviors.

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Several times during the play, interrupt by calling the pups. Have the puppies drag a leash initially—that way you can back up the Recall (come-when-called behavior). Keep the leash on until the Recall is reliable. In classes at Heaven On Arf, we have owners call their own pup, get hold of the leash, back out of the play group with their puppy, and feed him a treat. Once the puppy looks at the owner, he is released back into the play group. This way you are teaching your puppy to come when called, reinforcing him with food AND the “life reward” of returning to play (so coming when called does not always precede “the fun’s all over”).

No “humping” allowed – that is, no mounting another puppy from the front, side or rear, accompanied by pelvic thrusting. This is not always a sexual behavior, remember; it can be a Rank Ordering maneuver. Often the dogs who are using this are a bit insecure. It doesn’t matter whether the behavior of that individual is rooted in pushy or insecure emotions; I do not wish to promote this behavior in any way. Mounting puppies are removed from the “mountee” puppy with mild verbal disapproval (“I don’t like that!”) together with a hand on the collar or leash just sufficient to remove them from the body of the other dog, and then allowed to return to play. It might take 3 or 4 such corrections, but the puppy gets the picture: “humping” is not appropriate social behavior in any company! If he continues to do this after being removed 3 or 4 times, give the “mounter” a time-out in a crate or away from the play area for one or, at most, two minutes, then return him to play. Another alternative to the crate time-out is to take the “mounter” outside for a five minute walk, then bring him back in to try his social skills again.

If pups are timid, make sure they are not further terrified by the antics of their playmates. Encourage the other pups to play in another area (run off shouting and clapping to another part of the room to lure the puppies into a different area), and allow the scared pup to sit near his NEUTRAL, QUIET owner. This owner is not to “coddle” and sympathize with the puppy, but will remain a neutral support system for the pup. Do not allow these pups to hide under chairs, etc.

Usually by the end of the second or third play session, they are at least running around the other pups on the periphery of the action and are beginning to join in and play. If it is a small dog running with big dogs, I encourage the owner to pick up the dog, but remain “in the fray,” sitting in a chair with the puppy on her lap and giving the pup appropriate feedback for non-reactive or non-frightened behavior.

Some tiny toy pups are truly at risk playing with big, rough dogs or pups. Don’t coddle them, but do find them gentler playmates or playmates their own size. Puppies shouldn’t have to be HURT in the name of socialization.

Some puppies are really keen to play, and others more hesitant. This is all within a normal range of behavior. What is not within a normal range of behavior is excessive, serious “adult” aggression in very young dogs, or frenzied biting. You need the help of a behavior consultant for dogs showing these behaviors. Another “flag” for risky behavior as an adult is the puppy who runs and hides and, 8 or 10 weeks later, is still just as terrified as he was the first night of puppy class (given that the puppy is being offered appropriate playmates who are not too intimidating).

PLAY AND THE “OLDER” DOG

As a dog reaches that crucial 12-to-24 month age range, you typically see much less juvenile behavior and more “serious” rank ordering and adult behavior. Territory may become more important by this age, as do other resources, such as owners, toys or food. Running dogs this age together becomes more volatile and riskier, the primary reason to get your younger *puppy*, whose social window is wide open, into several canine social institutions.

Some dogs retain playful, juvenile puppy behavior well into adulthood. This is a wonderful attitude for a domestic dog and just comes naturally for some. If you have a dog like this, great. What is more common, though, is that dogs in this age group are now no longer interested in playing Chutes and Ladders™ and Go Fish, and have other things on their mind.

This is usually the age at which my own dogs are placed into play situations with great

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discretion. I have some older terrier bitches and Maeve, my shepherd bitch (who came to me as an 18 month old with many problems, including aggression), who have selected dogs they like and can associate with. I do not expect them to “play nice” with everyone they meet, and, indeed, past experience has taught me that Breanna and Maeve do not play well with others.

I see other older dogs who do not look like they are enjoying play, although they are not in the least aggressive. They just no longer want to play puppy games anymore. The older dog often does not want to have the goofy puppies body-slammng him. Many older dogs in groups of dogs they don't know look slightly uncomfortable. I find this normal and acceptable, although aggressive behavior, biting, fighting, and overreacting are NOT in any way acceptable.

It is unreasonable to expect ALL dogs to ALWAYS get along with EVERY dog they meet. I don't expect this from myself, certainly, and am able to avoid people I don't want to be around most of the time. I think it is wise to give our dogs the same options.

At the same time, even my nasty girls are not allowed to “act out” their status concerns, not bully other dogs. I have modified behavior in my dogs to be safe under many circumstances, even if another dog rushes up to them and is bouncing around. This is a situation that neither Breanna nor Maeve thinks is acceptable, and which has a tendency to make them wish dearly to reach out and chomp the idiot dog doing the bouncing. But the behavior modification I have done with them renders them safe in my presence. If you are going to have your dog out in public, she must have a minimum of manners. Part of that is, if another dog rushes up, you need to at least have time to get the other dog out of her face before she decides to take matters into her own hands – or teeth. So, your dog must be willing to turn to you, before turning on the other dog, at least long enough for you to withdraw with her.

Management is still my most effective (and safest!) tool. Maeve and Breanna do not run loose with unknown dogs. Period.

Play should be fun for your dog, but not ALL situations that you might think are fun for your dog are, in fact, fun. To some extent, it is “all right,” and even prudent, to allow your dog to tell you what situations she finds fun and which make her uncomfortable, and for you to make allowances for this. This is not an excuse to NOT socialize your dog, but, as she becomes older, it is realistic that she may take exception to specific circumstances or dogs.

Play can begin as play and escalate into an aggressive event. If there is going to be a change from Play to Posture, there is a subtle difference, initially, in body tension as the dogs approach. Then, as the interaction continues, rough behavior escalates. The Posturing Dog begins to ignore signals of discomfort from the other dog.

What begins as Posturing can also relax into Play, as indicated by a dog's willingness to recognize and acknowledge violations of body space and allow the other dog personal space. Play gives dogs a chance to practice using language skills. This experimentation with signals gives them information about how to get into and stay out of trouble!

When two dogs are interacting, watch both dogs very carefully. I prefer to work with one dog who is very stable, has sophisticated language skills, and whom I know well. I bring the “problem” dog in and observe my “control” dog very carefully. If the problem dog is making my control dog uneasy, I step in quickly to provide a time-out. This technique requires a very high level of expertise. However, once can gain a lot of diagnostic information about the problem dog this way, as well as teaching the problem dog to be less reactive. In this situation you would, of course, prioritize safety. That means muzzles, leashes, dragging long-lines – whatever it takes to reduce risk and prevent injury to either animal and to humans.

Even in normal play situations, if a dog is making another dog uncomfortable to a marked degree, or one dog is not responding correctly to calming signals, step in and give the dog feedback about his behavior in the form of a time-out or Cool Down. How else is appropriate behavior taught? In some situations it is neither appropriate nor safe to allow dogs to “settle their

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own “differences.” If I allowed Maeve and Breanna to do this, I would definitely have dead dogs. Should puppies be allowed to harass older, perhaps physically weaker or sore dogs? Absolutely not. Should adolescent dogs be allowed to be too rough with tiny puppies? Again, No.



Dogs love to participate in Role Playing Games. Instead of Dungeons & Dragons, they often play Prey & Predator. Here, Maeve and Dervish, who are old friends (and are therefore comfortable and familiar with each other’s language) are engaging in play. Maeve has volunteered to be Prey, and Dervish has assumed a Predator role. He is in the Eye and Stalk sequence: head and neck lowered, very intense stare, and exaggerated, slow movements.

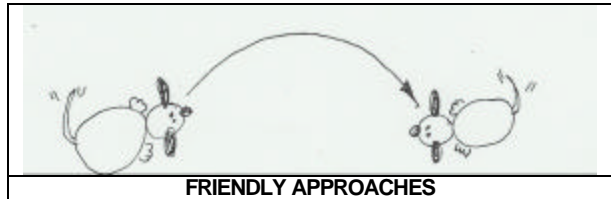
Next Dervish will leap at Maeve. While Dervish is in mid-air, Maeve may choose flight, or she may roll over in a submissive playful gesture, and they will play, as I call it, Mouth Jive Games, where they “fence” using their faces with an open mouth.

Then they will trade, and Dervish will be prey and Maeve will chase and “hunt” Dervish down. Dogs who get along will switch roles frequently. This willingness to “trade” roles is one way to determine that the current relationship between dogs is compatible, healthy and non-combative. Often the more assertive animal will volunteer to be prey first, perhaps to give the more timid or reserved animal the self-confidence to join in the play.

ROLE PLAYING GAMES

We monitor our own species like this all the time. It is how we teach our own children good people skills. It is easy to give kids feedback because we both speak the same native language – human! In order to provide this service for our dogs, we must first avail ourselves of as much of the dog’s native language as we can. For dogs who do not have good communication skills with humans or dogs, you must offer them some assistance. If you do not give feedback to the dog at the earliest moment that inappropriate behavior begins, you have lost a valuable opportunity to help your dog.

The tendency of someone who is not very experienced is to interfere too little (“they can settle it”) or too much (interrupting to the point that the dogs become frustrated and irritable, and therefore more likely to begin an altercation). Education about dog social systems and how dogs communicate will help you learn when to separate dogs, and even how to tell which dogs you don’t even want to try together! Experience will polish your skills so that you can increase a dog’s social skills with some well-time feedback.



All dogs like to participate in a greeting ceremony. When two friendly dogs greet, they commonly move toward each other on an arcing path, not a direct path. Then they may sniff the inguinal area, the genitals, and muzzles, usually in that order, though not necessarily.

You may then see the dogs entering into a discussion over Rank. However, they may just begin to play by exhibiting an obvious play-bow to display non-aggressive intent. Often the more submissive animal will signal using blinking eyes, paw lifts, nuzzling behaviors, with the ears slightly lowered. The more assertive animal will signal non-aggression by glancing away from the other dog with slightly squinting eyes (using an eye movement only, not moving the head), drawing the ears back slightly and, perhaps, with a slight or exaggerated head turn away from the other dog.

The best way to make friends with shy or recalcitrant dogs is to ignore them and allow them to initiate approaches. Soon you can’t get them out of your pocket! If they do not follow this path, they are giving you very valuable information! Take Heed!

When your dog is greeting another dog, or even just meeting one on the sidewalk, allow him the room and opportunity to arc. If your dog does not arc on his own, you can teach him how by helping him to arc with your own path of travel and body language. Encourage the behavior by

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gently directing his eye contact to you for a moment and then allowing him to greet the other dog from the shoulder or side, instead of directly from a frontal position. Make an arc in your own path if you are not stopping, and keep your dog's attention on you. A head collar, which is discussed extensively in the "A Chat About Equipment" section, may be necessary to achieve this the first few times, until your dog "gets the idea." (Detailed discussion about training dogs how to approach each other can be found in the chapters: "Dog-to-Dog Approaches," "Leash Aggression," and "Advanced Work with Dog-to-Dog Approaches.")