



Maplewood Dog Training

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Canine Friendships

by Katrin Andberg

Most of us, as humans, enjoy and value our friendships with other humans and we want our dogs to have those same valuable experience. Many of us, either consciously or unconsciously, view our dogs as an extension of our children and when we think of the friendships our children have they often involve playing at the park or daycare together for a few hours, playing games together, or perhaps going to an amusement park. Most of us assume our dogs would want that same type of social friendship experience, and fail to ask the critical question- “What kind of friendships does my dog want?”

Healthy Dog Friendships have a number of key elements:

- They are stable and consistent. Healthy dog friendships involve relationships with other dogs that they see consistently on a frequent basis without much change in the nature of the relationship, pack structure, dynamic or hierarchy
- In healthy dog friendships approx 90-95% of their time is simply spent hanging out together sleeping. Adult dogs on average sleep 14-18 hours a day, puppies often more so.
- About 5% of their time is spent engaging in very balanced, socially appropriate, respectful, healthy play for about 5-10 minutes at a time
- About 5% of their time is spent having fun with their owner together such as going on walks, playing ball, going for a swim or hike
- Excessive non-stop interactions with another dog for periods of time greater than 10-15 minutes is not physically, mentally or socially healthy for dogs and is actually very socially detrimental and often dangerous, likely to cause conflict and dog fights

What most owners think of as play when their dogs are engaging with other dogs either at the dog park, at doggie day care or with friend’s or family’s dogs, is inaccurate and a very far view from what it actually is. Play that goes on for longer than 5-10 minutes, often causes at least one dog in the interaction to become hyper-aroused and over threshold, leading him or her to no longer be able to accurately read and respect the other dog’s body language cues and stress signals. When the main form of communications dog use with each other, body language, is no longer being appropriately read and responded to, the possibility of a conflict and dog fight increases exponentially.

When interactions with other dogs involve high instances of changes in the pack structure and dynamic, as often happens at dog parks and doggie day care with dogs coming in and out of the environment at a high frequency, the amount of fun your dog is able to have is non-existent. Dogs find that ever changing pack dynamic incredibly stressful and anxiety provoking as no dog in the interaction has long enough to fully trust and maintain a stable and consistent relationship with any other dog present.

This then lends the question of, “If dog parks and doggie day care or not right environment for the healthy social friendships I think my dog needs, what are?”

How to Create Environments that Foster Healthy Dog Friendships-

As stated above healthy dog friendships maintain stability and consistence in the relationships. Owners can create these environments for their dogs in a few ways-

1. Talk to friends, family and neighbors who have other dogs that are well socialized and well trained who would also like their dog to have healthy friendships
2. Create small play groups of no more than 3-5 dogs and organize them in a large, fenced, neutral outdoor space on good footing such as grass, dirt or sand
3. During the play groups, supervise the interactions actively at all times and interrupt any interactions that appear aggressive, disrespectful to another dog’s body language cues or dangerous. Also interrupt any interactions that cause a dog to respond with stress cues. Common stress cues in dog’s are- yawning, sniffing the ground, licking their lips, sitting and scratching or doing a full body shake off.
4. During the play groups, every 30-60 seconds have each owner call their dog to them, breaking up the play interactions and reward their dog’s positively with a food treat and praise for coming to them. Once each dog is sitting with their owner, release the dog’s to play once more. Doing this not only ensures that the interactions between dog remain socially healthy and below threshold, but also creates a very strong come cue as your dog learns- “I come to my owner, then I get to go play again! Coming is awesome!”
5. After the dogs have played for about 7-10 minutes, end the play session, giving each dog about 15-20 minutes of alone downtime to take a break and rest, then perhaps allowing them to play once more again for another 7-10 minutes
6. Another key piece to healthy dog friendships is also- maybe your dog doesn’t really need or want relationships with other dogs, maybe what he really needs and wants is a valuable and rewarding relationship with you, his owner. Humans have actively and selectively bred dogs to want to have rewarding relationships with people for thousands of years, for many dogs there is no better friendship than the one they have with their owner.

Learning how to accurately read, understand and create environments and interactions for our dogs that foster healthy relationships is something that every dog owner should commit to doing. When we begin to understand and recognize what fun really looks like for our dogs, we can then set them up for a lifetime of healthy, enjoyable and safe relationships with others.