

# Sit Happens

Tips and Techniques with Trudi Thorpe



Photo by Animax

Dear Trudi,

*I have a five-month-old female Cattle Dog called Ruby, who is well socialised and has been through puppy pre-school. She's generally very good at the park with other dogs but sometimes her play becomes quite rough.*

*She'll play normally and then the play seems to escalate to bullying-type behaviour, standing over puppies and smaller dogs or trying to wrestle the other dog to the ground. It really is playing but some people, especially with young dogs, find it a bit extreme. She grabs onto collars and harnesses and sometimes chases tails. Once her play goes from happy to this more noisy and boisterous play, it's hard to distract her from the other dogs. She's not interested in liver treats so it's not like I can distract her with this.*

*Any help would be appreciated - we don't want to end up as dog park outcasts.*

Sharon M.  
North Sydney

Hi Sharon,

This type of situation can be both confronting and challenging because it is difficult to know what the right course of action is. On one hand, you don't want to stop Ruby from socialising with other dogs, but on the other hand, you don't want her to develop future antisocial tendencies when interacting with other dogs – and you certainly don't want to be branded dog park outcasts!

Socialising your dog with other dogs from an early age is an absolute must and attending puppy pre-school was a great way to start. Puppies learn vital lessons on how to act and behave by interacting with each other. They gain confidence and social skills through play and learn certain behaviour lessons like bite inhibition, interactive signals and body language.

Dogs are by nature sociable animals, so it is important that they get the opportunity to meet and interact with other dogs on a regular basis. Having said that, interplay must be mutually happy and light hearted to all dogs involved. Rough and boisterous play is both unsociable and inappropriate, and if not managed early on, may develop into something more serious as Ruby grows and matures.

Since Ruby seems to be inconsistent in practising appropriate play behaviour, effecting change will have to come from you through a combination of training and management. Training will assist in regulating Ruby's interaction with other dogs, and management will help counter condition, ie. change her existing play behaviour by not giving her the opportunity to play rough.

As far as training is concerned, start by going back to basics and achieving a RELIABLE sit, stay and most importantly – come. This is best achieved using positive reinforcement and rewarding her EVERY time that she responds favourably to your requests. Work out what motivates her to focus on you – it's not always food. A lot of working dogs LOVE a ball or a squeaky toy. These things may very well override a treat. Calm behaviour should always be encouraged and rewarded. Work in a quiet or low-distraction environment outside of the times that you are out at the park so that you can work under her threshold and she is able to focus. Ensure that the environment that you are working in is free of interruptions and distractions. Keep your sessions short, upbeat and fun.

Management begins with setting her up to succeed by avoiding groups of dogs, dogs that you are unfamiliar with, small dogs and puppies. Stick with one-on-one interaction with dogs that she knows and plays well with. It is best if you can work with someone that you know so that they can assist you by controlling their dog at regular intervals as directed by you. Begin all interaction in a controlled manner by approaching the other dog calmly on lead and having her sit before letting her off to play. Keep the first couple of play sessions short, monitor her interaction with the other dog very closely and end the session on a positive note before it gets too excitable. If during the session she starts exhibiting signs of boisterous or inappropriate roughhousing, intervene and stop play immediately and put her lead back on before it escalates by incorporating the training you have been doing with her. Get her to sit and focus on you. Use a calm and matter-of-fact approach. End the play session and reconvene the next day using the same methods as the day before. Prevention is better than cure. If she is not given the opportunity to rehearse behaviour that is rough or boisterous, the behaviour is more likely to diminish over time.

Be positive and with a consistent approach you should start to see results.

Trudi Thorpe runs a dog behaviour and training company, dogLOGIC, based in Sydney. As Trudi says "DOGS, DOGS, DOGS... A childhood obsession that I never grew out of." She devises and implements individual behavioural strategies and obedience techniques based on 18 years of studying dog problems and problem dogs.  
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