

You may have heard the term “policing” at pick-up time or read it on your dog’s report card. Another word for this is “enforcer.” It’s a common behavior we see in group play. Policing is usually a response to two other dogs playing by taking some action to interrupt them. Policing has a tendency to increase the arousal level of the entire group. These are the interrupting behaviors we see from policing:

- **Excessive barking.** The policing dog will become vocal and begin barking at the other dogs that are playing particularly energetically. They are expressing their dislike/agitation of the behaviors that the other dogs are engaged in. As a result, the policing dog will get closer to the playing dogs, sometimes circling. The policing dog will bark excessively in an effort to stop or tamper down the arousal of play. This is typically an initial or first step at communicating with those dogs and the attendant.
- **Nipping at heels.** When the dog policing physically intervenes by nipping at the heels of the dogs that are playing. This is different from friendly nipping to get the other dog’s attention to play or chase them, in that this policing behavior by nipping is likely to get increasingly faster and more intense. The two dogs being policed may respond to this intensifying nipping behavior with their own escalation, increasing the risk of a scuffle or worse. Sometimes instead of nipping, a dog may start to mount one of the dogs playing with the intent of getting them to stop what they are doing, with similar consequences as the nipping.
- **Muzzle punching.** This is when the policing dog uses their nose and muzzle, sometimes with an open mouth exposing teeth, to punch another dog. This is another example of behavior that is likely to be met with an escalation response.

We proactively manage these behaviors in daycare but when the dogs don’t respond well to our management techniques we have a harder time accommodating their policing behavior. Here are some skills you can work on with your dog in training or at home, to improve their time at daycare:

- **Name and attention.** A dog that reliably responds to their name and will redirect their attention to look at you (and not look back regardless of the environment) is a golden skill. This could mean the difference between the dog being easily managed and not manageable. This ability will enable you and Fur-Get Me Not staff to interrupt when a dog’s focus is on something that has a risk of being problematic. How focused they are in various situations is the challenge. While you may reliably get your dog to respond to their name and refocus their attention on you at home, it is a whole other ballgame to get this reliably in other circumstances, like say, when the dog is in a heightened state of arousal such as policing dogs that are playing. You can practice this skill at home until it can be done in your sleep. Then expand the skill by practicing it on your walks, near kids playing on a playground, near dog parks, and while another dog is walking on the other side of the street. To get any reliable behavior, that behavior must be practiced routinely and with great success.
- **Recalls.** Even better is the full recall. Recall is coming when called. Recall requires the Name and Attention skill and can be overlearned by practicing in a similar fashion. If a dog who is policing has a reliable recall, Fur-Get Me Not staff would be able to say their name and ask them to come to us, which

ultimately removes them from the proximity of the dogs that are playing. It is the first step to helping dogs learn to make better choices in difficult situations, by having them actively walk away from the situation. Once they come to us, we are then able to redirect their focus onto a new activity.

- **Body blocking.** Daycare staff will use this technique to demonstrate leadership and respect for spatial boundaries. When the dog does not have a reliable recall, another option is to physically intervene. Rather than cause tension on the collar or physically handle the dog by adding more stress to the situation, we try to use spatial barriers to communicate with the dog. Think of it like being in an elevator and someone gets too close to you, your natural inclination would be to try to create more space between you and that person. In our case, the daycare attendant will physically step in between the policer and the dogs that are playing, a silent request that the enforcer back away. When they do back away, we are able to redirect their focus onto a toy, another play partner, or encourage them to sit or lie down in a new space that is further away from the dogs that are playing. This technique will only work when we have established a mutual respect for space and setting boundaries.
- **Calming breaks.** When none of the other methods work, it is necessary to give the dog a timeout by crating them or removing them entirely from the playgroup. It is usually a sign that the elevated energy and activity level are overwhelming for that dog. Removing the policer from the environment is the best option so as to reduce the overall tension the policing behavior is causing to not just that dog, but the entire playgroup.
- **Switching playgroups.** Our playgroups are defined by personality and play style. If we believe we can remove what the policer wants to police (e.g. high energy play), we can try them in a lower energy playgroup. Or we can try the dog out in a different playgroup with more mature dogs that have better social manners that can calmly communicate to the enforcer that this is no big deal, there is no need for them to intervene and they can go on about their day. We may choose to switch playgroups based on the individual dogs that are attending that day or we may choose to make it a permanent change. Either way, we will communicate this to you so you are aware of the approach we are taking.

Most behaviors we experience in daycare range on a scale of manageable to unmanageable. Where your dog falls on that spectrum depends greatly on how well the dog responds to basic skills like we described above. Policing behaviors are an indicator that the daycare environment may be too stimulating for your dog. Your dog may prefer calmer environments than to be surrounded by high energy activity that is outside of their control. A policing dog may be more comfortable at home with a one-on-one play date, a long game of fetch with you, or a daily dog walk to break up their day, versus spending hours in a higher energy playgroup. If a dog exhibits policing behavior that we are unable to manage, we will have very little way to ease the policing dog's concerns on a regular basis. The best step in that case will be a dismissal from daycare.