

Play: Tug & Retrieving Games

Why play?

Play is perhaps the most underutilized activity in dog training and relationship building. Many people play with their dogs but the main purpose is generally to exercise an active dog. Exercise is extremely important, and most dogs could use more than they get, but play has additional benefits.

What can play be used for?

Training:

- Additional and often more powerful reinforcement than food from the dog's perspective
- Extremely effective tool for recall training for puppies and young dogs
- Agility, flyball, dock diving, protection sports, competitive obedience, and lure coursing all use toy rewards
- Dogs rewarded with play generally work longer and at a higher performance level than food reinforced dogs
- Excellent method to teach dogs to drop objects

Behavior Modification:

- Teaches overly excitable dogs how to safely use their teeth when playing
- Teaches impulse control for not jumping up or grabbing things from your hands
- Reduces frustration in dogs by allowing control of their environment via rules/responses
- Gives environmentally stimulated or reactive dogs a productive focal point
- Redirects play expectations from other dogs to people
- Teaches resource guarding dogs the benefits of sharing

Relationship:

- Interactive! More complex reward behavior than dog accepting food
- Handler becomes more interesting, therefore closer bond
- Promotes communication skills between handler and dog
- Play is a partnership which models the ideal relationship

Play is work, work is play!

How do you use Tug?

Let's begin by debunking the myth that playing tug with your puppy or young dog promotes aggression. Most puppies are hardwired to some degree to pick up things and carry them around. However, people don't like that; we want our dogs to learn to carry and retrieve only the items we choose. To that end, we often punish our dogs for picking up and playing with non-doggy items. This type of behavior modification method can stifle or completely eliminate the tugging and retrieving instinct in your dog. So encourage your dog when he picks up an item. If it is an item that he shouldn't have, just pick up something better and offer it to your dog.



Tug play utilizes an activity that the dog enjoys and the handler can participate in as an equal partner. However, it is a game where all parties need to understand the boundaries and follow rules. The key boundary is that dog teeth shall not meet human skin. The rules are that the dog cannot engage the toy without invitation, and he must release the toy on cue. For the handler's part, she needs to present and handle the toy correctly, and communicate in a consistent fashion.

Toy release is often called an "Out," "Give," or "Drop" and it should be noted that it is a different behavior than "Leave It." An "Out" instructs your dog to open his mouth and drop whatever he is holding; this cue comes in very handy in many facets of everyday life. Conversely, the equally useful "Leave It" cue advises your dog not to put the item in his mouth at all. (Please review our **Leave It** handout.)

Toy Selection

There are generally two categories of dog toys: destruction toys and interactive toys. Destruction toys are often purchased with the intent that the dog entertains himself. These toys are either soon demolished or fail to retain the dog's interest once the novelty dissipates. Interactive toys are those that are only used in an active play session between handler and dog. These shared toys may end up well used, but are rarely trite.

Beginning Level Tug Toys: Tug toys are interactive and should be developmentally appropriate, both from an age and experience perspective. The goal of beginning toys is to engage the puppy or dog and encourage him to first grab and then hold on to the toy. Thus, they should be relatively soft with a lot of movement built into the toy. Dogs also seem to prefer a slightly textured cover, like a jute-burlap weave, synthetic wool or felted wool. Your primary goal at this stage is motivation and enthusiasm. Novice toys should also be rather long or floppy to provide ample gripping opportunities. The additional length allows a sensitive dog sufficient distance from the handler's body which provides permission to tug on the handler's toy. This is known as reducing social pressure. Also, remember, your young dog has a teething period where his mouth may be more sensitive.

Advanced Level Tug Toys: Once your dog is an avid tugger, you can move to more advanced toys. Advanced toys have limited intrinsic movement and tend to be harder or more durable. They are generally shorter or less elaborate than beginner toys because at this stage you are also helping the vigorous player learn where to put his mouth. Your goal is to teach your dog control and to release the toy. A floppy toy with a lot of movement will hamper these objectives.



Teaching Tug

Now for the fun! Action is interesting to dogs as it stimulates their prey drive. Take your toy and start moving the toy away from the dog; in fact play a fair game of keep away for about 15 seconds before you let him catch the toy. Once he grabs it, praise his boldness and continue maneuvering. If your dog isn't gripping the toy well, short, quick tugs tend to make most dogs bite down harder. Try to play in a figure eight pattern horizontal to the ground rather than pushing and pulling it towards the dog. This creates an interactive game rather than a contest.

Often dogs are having so much fun they are loath to disengage. The most important thing to remember when teaching the "Out" is to make the toy appear dead. If you can keep the toy from moving, he will probably let go of it pretty quickly. At this point, you will appreciate your more quiescent advanced toy. You may need to have a dragging leash on your dog; step on it and walk up the leash towards your dog to stop him from pulling backwards to create more engagement. Or, you can keep your arms stiff and move with the dog. Once your dog opens his mouth, mark the behavior.

Guess what the reward is for the marked open mouth behavior? No, not a treat, but rather a new round of tug! Invite your dog to play the next round with a short jerk of your toy away from the dog and cue "Tug" or give a "Release" for those dogs just waiting for permission to play again! (Please review our **Marker & Release Cues** handout.) The "Out" behavior always creates a new game (handler rule), therefore "Out" is a rewarding behavior rather than signaling the end of the fun.

So, how *do* you end the game, you ask? You can take the dog and gently press his body up against your legs with one hand and with the other cup underneath his muzzle so he can't move his head around. He should tire of holding the toy and drop it. You can then slowly pick up the toy and place it out of sight. No sharp jerks, because that would be a cue to play again. He should not be allowed access to this toy between play sessions.

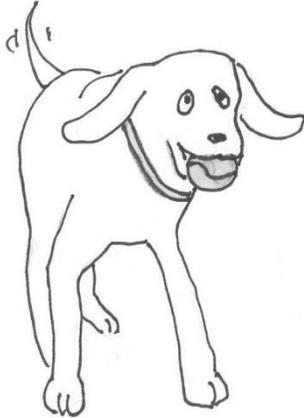
Two Toy Game

You can also play the "Two Toy" game. Purchase two identical toys. Play with your dog as described above, and when you want to "Out" the first toy, you pick up the second toy and activate it. Your dog should drop the lifeless (now humdrum) toy in order to engage with the newly mobile toy. Mark the "Out" and the fresh game on the second toy reinforces the open mouth behavior. Continue to switch toys in this manner, giving at least 5 – 10 seconds of tug play with each toy.

Note that at no point did you ever grab his collar, offer a treat, or even ask for the toy back. You won't label the "Out" until you can elicit it smoothly. The most contact you had with the dog was if you had to step on his leash to prevent him from creating tug pressure when you were ready to "Out".

If he accidentally nicks your hand while playing, you can vocalize OUCH and stop the game. It is in his best interest next time to be more careful with his teeth. To increase a reluctant player's motivation for the game, always stop the game when he is having a lot of fun. In other words, don't play until he is exhausted or loses interest. For the avid gamer, well, you will get tired long before he does!

How do you use Retrieving?



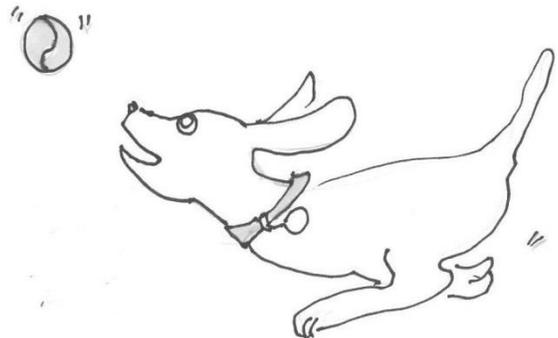
To teach your dog to retrieve, you first need to praise him for picking things up in his mouth, much as it might go against your instincts. If you praise him assiduously he'll bring the item to you, rather than running away from you. If it's an item you don't care about, or that you want him to have, praise him enthusiastically; tell him he's a genius.

If it's a forbidden object (and it's not dangerous or too fragile), praise him anyway! Then trade what he has in his mouth with an appropriate toy or a treat. And make sure he believes that the traded object is just as exciting as the original; play with him, don't just hand it to him. Before long, your dog will bring you all sorts of things and you won't have to chase him at all.

Progress from Carrying to Retrieving:

Now we can extend carrying to retrieving what you want! Follow the steps below – they're fun, and the process usually works.

1. Teach your dog how to play tug as described above. Once he thoroughly enjoys tug, you're ready to move on.
2. Play tug energetically for a few minutes. When you "Out" the toy from the dog, mark the behavior, release the dog and toss the toy just a few feet away. As soon as he grasps the toy, you should quickly move away from the dog. He should grab it, chase you and present the toy for another tug session.
3. Oblige the dog with a rousing new game of tug. Playing tug at the end of a retrieve rewards and motivates your dog to return to you. After all, most dogs will chase a toy; it is returning the toy to the handler that is in question.
4. Repeat the above process, gradually running away from the dog a bit farther and faster each time. You can also experiment with tossing the toy a bit farther as well.
5. To build motivation, stop playing well before your dog has had enough. You want to leave him desiring more, even if he isn't as tired as you would like. We are training your dog, not simply exercising him.
6. After a time, start using different tug toys to generalize the behavior. Perhaps go from a rope toy to a bumper or a Frisbee. If you want to graduate to a ball, try getting a rope ball first, switching to a regular ball as he gets more enthusiastic about the game.
7. When you switch completely over to a ball, you can throw the ball, wait until he picks it up and run away from him. Once he chases and reaches you, get your tug toy and invite him to engage. He should drop the ball, and play tug. This technique will ensure that your dog will always return to you as quickly as he chases the ball.
8. Once your dog is proficient and enthusiastic, there are many advanced training applications for both tug and retrieving games. And truly, the most important thing is to enjoy the process!



Safety Concerns:

Tug play and retrieving games are athletic endeavors and have some inherent risks, especially for people with large dogs, extremely high drive dogs or for handlers unfamiliar with playing with their dogs. Children should always be supervised and parental discretion is advised.

There are many nuances, training applications and troubleshooting tips that may apply to your situation. Contact **Behavior & Training** at 415.506.6280 or OhBeHAVE@MarinHumane.org for a private training session on effective communication in tug play.

Training Resources:

Marin Humane's **Behavior & Training** conducts agility and flyball classes that utilize tug and retrieve as primary rewards. Sign up on our [Behavior & Training](#) page for the next available series.

We also provide **Dog Training Instructors** and **Consultants** available for private training or consultations (on-site or in-home) at 415.506.6280 or OhBeHAVE@MarinHumane.org.

Tug and retrieving toys are available for purchase at Marin Humane's **Animal Outfitters Store**. Stop by our store or visit us online at: [Animal Outfitters](#). Please call 415.506.6229 to verify available stock.

Remember to license your dog (It's the LAW)! If your dog gets lost, a license tag on your dog's collar is the fastest way to reunite you and your dog. Even if your dog is microchipped, a license tag is immediately visible and doesn't require a scanning device to read. For more information about licensing, microchipping, and other services provided by **Marin Humane**, visit us at MarinHumane.org or stop by at 171 Bel Marin Keys Blvd, Novato, CA.

