

Ten good reasons to play tug with your dog

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While there are some aspects of the ‘you must be Alpha wolf’ myth which are just plain silly (sitting in your dog’s bed, for example!), there are others which genuinely bother me. One of those is the idea that playing tug with your dog will somehow make him dominant, aggressive or possessive. Rather than simply protest against this nonsense, I started to think of all the times when playing tug with my dogs has actually helped – indeed, I began to take note of all those times when it has directly aided and abetted *good* behaviour.

Now, before we all go getting hot under the collar, let me say that I believe games should always be played by the rules, and because playing tug is one of the more physical ways of playing with your dog, this is doubly important. Dogs are often stronger than humans. They are always faster. This means that safety is paramount when playing tug with your dog, and that the rules should be engaged at all times.

Rule 1:

The toy should be kept low to the ground. A toy which flies through the air at head-height offers an invitation for the dog to grab – bringing his teeth way too close to your face and head. So, keep the toy on the floor. It can whizz about like a prey animal trying to get away from the dog, or it can act like a snake to engage your dog’s interest, but it must stay low to the ground, no matter how exciting the game gets.

Rule 2:

Your dog must never put his teeth on you, even by accident. If he does, the game finishes instantly. March out of the room in an award-winning performance of disgust at your dog’s rudeness.

Rule 3:

Your dog must let go of the toy on one quiet command. This keeps the game safe, because no matter how excited your dog gets when playing, you will be able to control him.

The command you give your dog to release the toy can be any word you choose, such as “Give,” or “Drop.” However, it should act as an instant cue to drop, not as a threat that you have to shout or repeat! For a great demo of how to teach a reliable drop, check out the video at Domesticated manners: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ndTiVOCNY4M>

Rule 4:

Many dogs are worried about dropping the toy because they fear that you are going to be a ‘toy snatcher’ and grab the toy away from them. Make sure that whenever your dog releases the toy, it stays on the floor exactly where he dropped it. He can then eat the treat in peace, or have a rest, or settle down, knowing that there’s no threat of losing the toy.

While we are tackling the realities head-on, it’s true that some dogs do get excited when playing tug. Some shake the toy, some even growl! This is normal dog behaviour and while it may be determined by

a high drive to chase and catch 'prey' or because the dog is aroused by movement and excitement, it's not inherently a problem. Personally, none of these aspects bother me – indeed playing tug then gives the perfect opportunity to teach the dog impulse control and how to reduce his own frustration by releasing the toy on cue and then playing again as a reward. There is only one type of behaviour that would stop me enjoying tug games with my dog and that is resource guarding – if your dog is a guarder then you are better off playing other games which do not risk making the toy more valuable than it already is.

With that one caveat in mind, here are my top ten reasons to play tug with your dog:

1. Stop / go switch

Active, energetic dogs need to be able to let off steam, but they then need to be able to calm down again quickly. Teaching your dog to be up and active, then settle down instantly when you tell him can be taught by playing tug with your dog – and can then be used in many other circumstances where self-control is key.

2. Rules and consistency – reduction of frustration

The ideal game of tug involves lots of fun, energy and action, but very little frustration. This 'perfect storm' of activity is caused by a balance of excitement tempered by predictability and controllability on both sides. Over just a few repetitions, your dog will learn the rules of engagement – and as long as you have the clarity of mind to stick to those, then both of you know exactly how the game is played. Very few other aspects of life are so clear cut, and if there's one thing that dogs thrive on, it's consistency.

3. Engage using a toy, not by biting

Essential for puppies, who are driven to explore the world with their mouths and put their teeth on everything, and for adolescents, who may need a little reminding that humans are not chew toys, tug games allow the dog to do what comes naturally but through a safe and appropriate medium. It is always far safer and more appropriate for dogs to want to engage humans in physical play via a toy than it is by grabbing a sleeve or a trouser leg!

4. Confidence builder

There's nothing like teaching tug to a shy, worried or fearful dog to boost their confidence. Once they get the hang of it, the sheer joy of putting pressure against a toy - and winning - it is like a magic pill.

If your dog is reluctant to play, move the toy *away* from him slowly, as if it was a snake. Make it disappear behind the furniture and then reappear again briefly. This makes it almost irresistible. Once your dog is pulling back against the toy, make sure that you let him win it. This does not tell him he's the leader! It tells him that the game is fun, worth playing, and that you are a human that understands the need for give and take in play.

For a fabulous demo of how to teach reluctant dogs to start to play tug, watch Joanna Hill's DVD, 'The Motivation Movie' – available from www.cleverdogcompany.com.

5. Teaching a reliable 'give'

No matter how you choose to teach this, the essential message is that dropping a valued item does not result in punishment, or loss of the toy itself. Many dogs that have had previous history with human toy snatchers, or who have come from a background where they have needed to fight for the right to eat or play with littermates or other dogs, may already think this the norm, but practising tug games where the release of the toy is rewarded can serve to change their minds. Just make sure that the method you choose is one that rewards the dog for letting go voluntarily. This achieves mind control, not just physical control.

6. I'm more fun than the environment

Dog too distracted by the environment? Food not doing the job? For some dogs, the lure of a tug toy is what it takes to get their attention and keep it. This is because play with toys is more active, energetic and engaging than food alone, and can keep a dog's attention for longer. Of course, some dogs can focus on chasing a ball or toy and retrieving it back to you, but others cannot – they need direct interaction and continuous motivation to keep playing with their owner rather than choosing the distractions of the environment. If yours is one of those, then playing tug is the answer. Get your dog hooked, and keep him addicted to you by being the best play mate on the planet.

7. As a major reward

So, your dog has just done four solid minutes of heelwork. Akin to watching paint dry in the canine mind, the reward at the end really had better be something worth working for. Of course, food is good, but toys and games – particularly games which involve the expression of natural motor patterns such as running, chasing, or tugging – add to the reward scale in leaps and bounds. One rule here. If you are going to use tug games as a reinforcement for a training task well done, then make sure you are not half-hearted about it. The game needs to be good: it should take the time it takes, so don't rush this part of the process.

8. If you have something in your mouth, you can't bark

The equivalent of a canine gob-stopper, having a tug toy in his mouth means that your dog is going to find it more difficult to bark (at the very least the sound will be muffled!). Teaching your dog to hold a toy in happy anticipation of a game of tug is a great way to keep him quiet when he might otherwise be tempted to listen to the sound of his own voice – especially when he's excited, such as at the arrival of visitors, or seeing another dog in the distance.

9. Play - with manners - between two dogs in the same household

It takes time to build trusting relationships between dogs in the same household, and this can be created or destroyed by how dogs react around their toys. 'Sharing' is not necessarily in the doggie welcome manual – and so teaching dogs how to play nicely together can sometimes be down to us. This is useful because dogs playing with toys tend to be less hectic and aroused than dogs playing biting and wrestling games – which does not promote harmony in the average household! Using a long (sometimes very long!) tug toy can really help to teach dogs how to play appropriately together - as dogs can learn to enjoy playing tug with one another without having to be in close physical proximity.

10. Building a bond

Playing tug games with your dog seems to have received rather bad press over the last few years – instead of seeing the many positives that this type of game playing can bring, it's become associated with so many of the mythical risks of dominance that simply aren't true. While, of course, we need to make sure that we play by the rules, playing tug gives us great opportunities to engage with our dogs in a way that they inherently understand and enjoy – allowing the bonds of trust to be formed just as strongly at the same time. The message is simple – if you want to be the centre of your dog's world, make sure the games you play are the ones he'd choose.

The perfect tug toy

The perfect toy for tugging should be long and soft. Long enough to keep your hands and fingers out of the way of the dog's mouth, and soft enough that both of you are happy to grip on. I love plaited fleece toys, as they are lightweight, comfortable to hold, strong, and can go in the washing machine! Never allow anyone in the family to play tug using their clothing or as part of a wrestling game. The toy is part of the cue to play and this makes and keeps the game safe.

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