

# Tug of War



Dog owners have been admonished for decades to never play tug of war with their dogs because of the risk of it increasing aggression and/or dominance in the dog. Even many dog resource people such as breeders, trainers and veterinarians caution against this game. This is partly a failure to discriminate between agonistic behavior (conflict resolution & defensive aggression) and predatory behavior. Also, many people have issues about witnessing intensity. Intensity is not aggression, however.

Played with rules, tug-of-war is a tremendous predatory energy burner and good exercise for both dog and owner. It serves as a barometer of the kind of control you have over the dog, most importantly over his jaws. The game doesn't make the dog a predator: he already is one. *The game is an outlet.* It's intense, increases dog focus and confidence and plugs into something very deep inside them. The big payoff is in lowered incidence of behavior problems due to understimulation and a potent motivator for snappy obedience. There is a maxim in training: control the games, control the dog. It's also extremely efficient in terms of space and time requirements.

If tug of war is correctly installed, when you're playing and the dog "wins," i.e. you let go, he will try to get you to re-engage in the game rather than leaving and hoarding. If tug has not been correctly installed, the dog will leave and hoard when he wins. Don't panic about who's dominant when this happens, simply avoid key tactical errors. Play hard to get rather than chasing the dog. Show zero interest or investment in the object. Avoid battles with dogs involving speed and agility - you cannot win. Psych-outs are much better. Pretend you couldn't care less, notice and reward steps in the right direction and be patient. The goal is for the dog to learn that the toy is infinitely more fun when brought to life by you than when dead. Here's how to install the rules.

## Tug of War Rules

### 1) Dog "Outs" on Command

Have a release command such as "out," "give" or "let go." Before revving the dog up to pull on the object for the first time, practice some low-key exchanges with him. The sequence is 1) your command to out, 2) the dog releases, 3) a food reward from your pocket and 4) your command to re-take. If the dog doesn't take the object in his mouth in the first place, practice the exchanges anyway, simply by giving the object to the dog (put it down right in front of him) and then taking it back, giving the reward and then replacing it. Rehearse dozens of exchanges for reward. We want the "give" part strongly primed before anything else happens.

If the dog takes the object and runs away, practice exchanges without completely releasing the object, so that the dog experiences having something taken away,

obtaining a reward and then having it presented to him again. Possessive types stand to benefit enormously from the exchange practice (much like object and from learning that it's more fun to play *interactively* with an object than to have it to themselves. Object guarders must be loosened up with a solid history of exchanges before proceeding with the actual game.

If the dog hangs on and will not out (very common), give the “out” command and then prompt him to out by putting a tasty treat on his nose. This will get things rolling. Once the dog has done a few, hide the reward so that the dog is doing his part of the bargain first, on faith. Continue to food reward all outs and then give the re-take command. In fact, if the dog is a reluctant outer, you will food-reward every out until he 1) outs without hesitation on the first command every time and 2) knows and enjoys the tug game. The re-take will eventually become the reward for outing on command – when he fails to out, you simply pause or end the game. Early on, however, we want lots of successes to get him hooked on the interactive aspects of the game. This way it will matter to him later on when we deliver a time-out penalty. When the dog knows, loves and is hooked on the game, ending it abruptly is by far the most potent motivator against rule-breaking.

## **2) Designated Object and Compound Take Invitation**

This rule prevents the dog from misfiring. Have one toy that you use for tug. Never use anything else. The take invitation consists of this special object PLUS a special command. One without the other should never work. Actively proof the dog: teach him that a) the game never ever works with anything other object even if you give the command and b) the special object only comes to life if you also give the command after presenting it. This rule is to prevent someone from innocently picking up the tug toy and being enthusiastically jumped by the dog. It also avoids him grabbing some other object you're holding because he thought he heard the command. The likelihood of someone presenting the right object and mistakenly saying "make a kill" are pretty remote. Your designated tug toy can double up as a retrieve object or hide & seek target too, but have no other things with which you play tug of war. Limit this activity to one target.

## **3) No Uninvited Takes or Re-Takes**

Invite the dog to take and play as usual. Practice plenty of outs and re-takes. If the dog re-takes *before* you've invited him, give a No Reward Mark (“OH! Too bad!”), then a time-out and then an obedience break. Then invite him to take. This rule infraction is extremely common in tug-of-war games, so don't sweep it under the rug. If he goes for *another* re-take before being invited, i.e. makes the same mistake twice in a row, end the game. This teaches the dog impulse control even when he's Amped Excitement Mode.

## **4) Frequent Obedience Breaks**

Tug of war is one of the great recyclable rewards for obedience training. Alternate back and forth between rounds of tug and brief obedience sequences (1 – 4 commands after an out and before a re-take) to spot check control during the game and to obtain obedience from the dog when he's in Amped Excitement Mode. Every initiation of the tug game is a potent reward that you can use to select a particularly nice obedience response. The dog will try fanatically hard to improve his obedience to get you to restart the game. Through their repeated association over time, the two activities will blur in the dog's mind, eventually making the dog love obedience training.

## 5) Zero Tolerance of Accidents

When taking the object or re-adjusting their take, dogs will sometimes make contact with your hand or other part of you by mistake. And, sometimes they will latch on to you or your clothing as though you were also a tug toy. Don't let this go unnoticed. Screech "OUCH!" even if it didn't hurt and abruptly end the game. *Game misconduct every time.* Dogs are capable of controlling their jaws with great precision if you give them a reason to do so. The obvious fringe benefits to this rule are that you remind the dog of the sensitivity of human skin and the great necessity to keep their jaws off people at all times, *and* you've installed this while the dog is in Amped Excitement Mode, which is most often where sloppy jaws are a problem.

If the dog is not breaking any of the rules, allow him to get as excited as he wants. This includes head shakes, strong tugging and growling. Once these rules are established, they need to be maintained by constant practice & testing. When things go wrong, it's inevitably because the human slacked off on enforcing the rules.

At the other end of the spectrum from overzealous dogs who need scores of priming to teach them to "out" reliably and constant rule checks, are dogs who are hard to engage in the game at all. These reluctant dogs, very much like reluctant retrievers, are sometimes inhibited, worried types who are apologetic by nature or have histories of punishment for touching or picking up objects. These guys must be built up. They are reluctant to take, hold and hang on. Go for each of these in turn, praising enthusiastically any move in the right direction. The praise, in these cases, functions mostly as a safety cue. You are giving the dog permission to loosen up and act like a dog without fear of reprisal. Reluctant tuggers can be turned around. The extra benefits of the game for these dogs are confidence-building and dissipation of free-floating anxiety. It's no fun being slightly worried all the time.

### Tug Rule Summary

- 1) **Dog Must "Out" On Command:** out-on-command is motivated initially with food rewards and later maintained with re-initiation of the game when the dog outs and a time-penalty or game-misconduct for failures to out
- 2) **Designated Toy and Compound Start Command:** the game is only played with one specific toy and never with anything else, and there is a specific initiation command
- 3) **No Uninvited Takes or Re-Takes:** dog must not grab before the initiation command or else face a time-penalty or game-misconduct
- 4) **Frequent "Obedience Breaks" in the Action:** these are "outs" followed by a bit of obedience (sit-down-tricks) followed by re-initiation as reward
- 5) **Jaw Prudence:** dog must never knick you or he faces a game-misconduct. Even if you deliberately "feed" a dog your hand, he must go out of his way to avoid it.  
**No exceptions**

# PLAY-FIGHTING, TAG & TUG O' WAR

*By Dr. Ian Dunbar*

No topic engenders such a wide range of conflicting advice than whether or not it is advisable to play physical-contact games with dogs, e.g., play-fighting, tag and tug o' war. Some breeders and trainers are vehemently opposed to these games, feeling they make the dog uncontrollable and more aggressive. Other breeders and trainers, however, feel frequent games make for a better companion. Certainly, there are pros and cons of doing almost anything with a dog and this includes roughhousing. Without a doubt, misguided and/or inadequately informed owners can very quickly turn a good dog bad by allowing contact games to get out of control. On the other hand, a thinking owner can derive so many benefits from properly playing doggy games.

## **Disadvantages**

It is highly unlikely dogs become more aggressive by playing games with their owners. Quite the contrary, in fact; customarily, game playing builds confidence and handleability and promotes friendliness. Perhaps the so-called increase in aggressiveness would be better termed excessive rambunctiousness - play-chasing, play-growling, play-mouthing and play-fighting, i.e., the dog is over-friendly. Nonetheless, regardless of how friendly the dog's intentions, unsolicited rambunctious roughhousing; is often annoying and can be potentially dangerous. Human games and sports offer a good analogy, especially when the participants have been poorly; coached and/or the game is badly refereed. It is not the games - tennis, football, or ice hockey, which are at fault, rather potential problems come down to a matter of control. And so it is with canine games.

It is highly unlikely certain games have an intrinsic property to render dogs uncontrollable. Instead it is the manner in which the owner allows the dog to play the game, which influences the dog's subsequent tractability and willingness to comply. For example, many trainers incorporate game playing and the necessary teaching of a multitude of game rules to reinforce their control over the dog. Alternatively, allowing a dog to play willy-nilly, without instruction or guidance would no doubt make him more difficult to control. Control-problems are threefold:

1. the owner allows the intensity of play to increase to the point where it may be physically dangerous
2. the owner can no longer stop the dog from playing and
3. the owner allows the dog to initiate unsolicited play sessions. The owner barely knew which end of the whistle to blow.

So, why not just stop playing these games altogether? Well, a good class instructor quickly learns to anticipate a lot about dog behavior and a whole lot

more about human nature. Firstly that dogs, especially adolescent dogs, are going to attempt to play this way with people anyway. In fact, much of a dog's waking existence and certainly most of his playtime focus on mouthing (and/or biting) objects both inert and alive. Consequently, it makes sense to take time to teach the critter rules. And secondly, that many owners, especially men and children and extra-especially boys (ranging in age from two to fifty-two years old), are going to play these games with dogs anyway. And so, it similarly make sense to teach owners how to be better canine coaches, so they may correctly referee Rover and reap the many benefits these games have to offer.

### **Advantages**

Firstly, games are good exercise for dogs and owners – good physical exercise and good mental exercise. Also, games are fun for dogs and owners. As soon as the dog learns the two of them can have fun together, he begins to focus his attention on the owner, rather than always looking to other dogs for enjoyment and amusement. Similarly, the owners learn they can actually have fun with their dog (a sad realization, believe it or not but many owners have to be taught how to have fun with their dogs. In fact, someone has even written an entire book on this topic). Suggesting and describing games is one of the best ways to motivate owners to train their dogs - games, and of course, which have been intricately integrated with basic obedience skills.

A number of trainers have designed entire obedience programs around game-playing, following the maxim - control the games and you control the dog. Indeed, there is nothing like a controlled game of tag to give moribund recalls a spark. Similarly, the dog's favorite tug o' war toy is an ideal lure for teaching sighthounds to come, sit and heel, for teaching terriers anything (and everything), or for re-motivating moose-like dogs and getting them to enjoy obedience and enthusiastically perform with verve and vigor.

The above advantages are really no more than attractive fringe benefits, however, when compared with the primary reasons for playing tag and tug o' war and roughhousing with dogs. When played according to the rules, these games:

1. increase the level of control owners have over their dogs, specifically proofing control at times when the dogs are excited and worked-up and
2. motivate, build confidence and make the dog less aggressive, specifically improving and maintaining his bite inhibition.

### **The Rules**

Any physical game, whether dodge-ball, fencing, wrestling, agility, lure coursing, or tug o' war all require rules to prevent the participants from hurting each other. In fact, playing games is one of the best ways to teach rules to children and dogs. Games are designed to practice controlling the participants when they are

bubbling with excitement. Dogs must be actively taught that the rules are always in effect, even though the dog might be beside himself with exuberance.

The primary rule of any game is to stop playing when the whistle blows. In fact, the primary reason for playing any physical game is to teach this prime directive - to stop playing immediately on request. It is a rare owner who, bursting turgid with pride over a multi-titled dog, has not on occasion been dismayed to find the dog will not come, will not do a down stay and will not even acknowledge the owner's existence on planet Earth whenever he is chasing tennis balls and Frisbees, playing with other dogs, or squinting at squirrels in the park. You will find it is prudent to practice beforehand when the game and the excitement are both under your control, rather than trying to teach the dog in a real life situation.

Never allow a dog to indulge in any enjoyable activity for long periods of time uninterrupted and then to stop the game altogether, otherwise the dog will not want to stop. Instead, let the dog play for as long as you like, or as long as the dog likes, but frequently; stop the game for short breaks. Why stop the game? To practice stopping the game, of course. Each stop-on-request offers proof you can control the dog no matter what he is doing. How to stop the game? - By telling the dog to sit, lie down, or by giving any obedience command. Each time the dog stops playing and sits, you may reward him by telling him to resume playing once more. Thus, the game now becomes a reward working for training, rather than a severe distraction in competition with training.

Just as the dog must learn to always stop playing and respond appropriately on a single command, he must also learn never to start playing unless requested to do so. It would be disastrous for a dog to take it into his head to initiate a game of herd and tag with a group of elderly people on an outing to a Herding Trial, to play tug o' war with a child's Nerf football, or to roughhouse with Grandpa in the middle of his TV dinner. Unintentional misfiring is easily prevented by using combination commands, much the same as some competition folk protect their obedience patterns and prevent anticipation. For example, the dog is taught only to play tag on those occasions when the command "Tag" is given with the dog in a Down-stay. Similarly, the dog is taught never to touch an object in a person's hand unless told "Take it" and moreover, never to play tug o' war unless the commands "Take it" and "Pull" are given in succession, whilst the dog is in a Sit-stay.

Yes, but...this is all so complicated, why not just forbid owners and dogs to play these games at all? Well there are two reasons: firstly, remember? - many owners and many dogs are going to try their darndest to achieve uncontrollable rumbustiousness anyway. And secondly, there is no better way to accomplish basic safety training (teaching the dog not to barrel-into, bump, or jump-up in people), or specifically maintain the dog's bite inhibition throughout adulthood.

Physical games are the best means to teach and reinforce specific rules about jaw-contact and jaw-pressure.

Playing tag, the dog learns that no matter how wild and woolly the action, he must never touch - graze, glance, nose, paw, or bump - any part of a person's body with any part of his body. In tug o' war the dog learns never to touch any object held in a person's hand unless requested to do and when requested, to do so ever so gently with butterfly-wing-jaws. In play fighting, the dog learns to mouth hands only and never to mouth human hair or clothing. Why hands only? Because hands are extremely sensitive. During puppy-hood the dog learned never to exert pressure when mouthing and by far the best way to maintain bite inhibition is to allow the adult dog to mouth hands on request. Why not mouth human hair or clothing? Because hair, scarves, ties, trouser legs, and Wellington boots do not have neurons and if the dog receives no feedback from his mouthing, he will bite down harder and his bite inhibition will gradually deteriorate as he gets older.

An added bonus about training with games: if the dog transgresses any of the above rules, physical punishments are absolutely uncalled for and even reprimands are seldom necessary. If the dog bends a single rule, the owner simply says "Finish" and walks off. The dog learns that any rule-bend always abruptly terminates an otherwise thoroughly enjoyable game. Consequently, well-coached dogs learn to respect rules for canine games better than most humans playing tennis and ice hockey.

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