



Tug of War: How to Get Training Value Out of a Game

Many folks harbor concerns about playing tug with a dog, but this game actually offers numerous advantages *when done correctly*. Here are some of the benefits of tug that we love:

- It's a great form of exercise.
- Many dogs *love* to play tug, and it provides an exciting activity for the person and dog to do *together*, so there is a valuable bonding component.
- It makes the person more relevant and can therefore be used in different situations to better compete with environmental distractions because you can offer such an exciting game.
- It can be a powerful reinforcer, used immediately after the dog performs a desired behavior.
- It gives us the ability to teach the dog to toggle between high excitement and calm behavior.
- It allows us to continue reinforcing the message that teeth may not touch human flesh.
- We can also build very practical skills using manners cues while playing the game.

TUG RULES

These important rules allow you to create a positive and productive tugging game with your dog:

- One specific toy is designated for tugging, and is not available to the dog at other times (like a long rope toy or braided fleece). When this one-tug-toy-only concept is understood, the dog learns that trying to tug on other toys, the leash, or your clothing is off limits.
- The game does not begin until you give a specific cue, such as GET IT, that lets the dog know tugging is now approved.
- No tooth contact is *ever* permitted on your hand (or any other body part) while playing.
- The dog reliably responds to a cue, like DROP, and lets go of the toy right away.
- Brief breaks are incorporated in between bouts of tug to promote relaxed behavior and/or to practice simple obedience cues.

The most challenging skill to train with most dogs is the toy release. (Some common cues for this behavior: OUT or DROP.) To make this training as efficient as possible, keep the following tips in mind:

- When you know the dog will be highly motivated to grab the toy, be sure to give your invitation-to-tug cue, such as GET IT, just before giving him access to the toy.
- Begin playing at a very low level of excitement. Behave calmly yourself, and only tug weakly at first.
- After a short bout of gentle tugging, say the DROP cue and then immediately hold a fantastic treat right in front of the dog's nose. If he wants to eat it, he must drop the toy. Praise and release the treat as soon as he lets go of the toy. Note: with some dogs, the value of the treat

can make all the difference between success or failure with the DROP, so fresh proteins may be necessary for some dogs, at least in the beginning.

- After consuming the treat, promptly invite the dog to tug again by saying GET IT. With repetition, the tug-crazy dog will see that dropping the toy when requested immediately yields a yummy treat *and* recommencement of the game. Over time, the recommencement of the game will be rewarding enough, and treats can be faded.
- With most dogs, after you've done about 10 reps of saying DROP and then presenting a treat right in front of their nose, they'll begin to DROP the toy *before* the food bribe is presented. When this happens, praise and deliver a treat after each success. In this way, you move from bribing the dog to let go, to reinforcing him for letting go of his own volition.

Tips: some dogs will be too easily distracted by fabulous treats, and once they earn the first treat they may be reluctant to re-engage in the tug game. If this happens, use lower value treats to reinforce the DROP, and verbal encouragement to build more vigor into the tug game.

On the other hand, some dogs will be so engaged by the tug game that they won't let go of the toy, even when you present a treat. Try showing the treat and then tossing it to the floor in the dog's line of sight. Often, the movement of the treat will entice the dog to "chase it down," so they'll release the tug toy and get the food reward.

DEALING WITH INFRACTIONS

By infractions, we mean any attempts to grab the toy before you've said GET IT, or any tooth contact on your hands, other body parts, or clothing. Dogs have exquisitely precise control of their mouths, as long as we *teach* them it's important to aim very purposefully for the toy only.

If a grab attempt occurs before the GET IT cue, smoothly move the toy out of the dog's range. When you next present it, do so a bit further away to make the task easier for the dog at first. Then, once you say GET IT, quickly move the toy close to his mouth. Present the toy so that a large part of it is facing the dog's mouth, making it easy to grab the right thing and not your hand or clothing.

If tooth contact occurs, say "OUCH!" (even if it doesn't hurt) and stop playing. A sensitive dog may release the toy when you "yelp," in which case you can pause with the toy held back for a few seconds, then insert a couple of obedience cues before inviting the dog to play again. If he doesn't let go of the toy, just let go of it yourself. Tug games require both the person and the dog to play, so letting go of the toy when the dog breaks a rule can be an extremely effective consequence because the fun stops.

Contrary to what some people believe, letting the dog "win" does not inspire dominance or other nefarious plots to take over humankind. The fun dramatically *ends* when you let go. You can then stand and ignore the dog for a few seconds, or take a short break. When ready to engage with the dog again, insert some calm obedience skills *first* and reward good responses before re-inviting the dog to play tug again. If he has a hard time controlling his enthusiasm initially, dial down the excitement of the game until his response to your cues is reliable.

You will find a video demonstration called “Cooperative Tug Game” in your CATCH Student Center in this phase, which shows how the dog actually moves the toy back in the direction of the person’s hand after he “wins” at tugging.

In summary, keep these points in mind whenever you are playing Tug of War.

THE FLOW OF A GOOD TUG GAME

- The dog waits for your cue before grabbing the toy.
- He never touches you with his teeth during play, even if your hand is close to his mouth.
- He lets go of the toy promptly, when cued.
- If *you* let go of the toy and he wants to keep going, he invites you to recommence tug play by moving the toy back towards you, gently.
- He is able to respond to obedience cues in between tugging, like sit, down, leave it, touch, and by doing so, is successfully toggling between states of excitement and calm.
- All the steps above are easily followed, even during increasingly rousing bouts of tug.