

DOG 23

How to play with your dog



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How to play with your dog

Dogs are social animals and one of the ways they build and learn about relationships and communication is through play. Playing with your dog regularly will teach you about your dog's personality and strengthen the bond between you. By preventing boredom, providing exercise and giving an outlet for your dog's natural instincts, play can ensure inappropriate behaviour does not develop.

What do dogs like to play?

It depends on your dog's personality. Watch what your dog does when excited. Does your dog chase, grab or pounce on things? Experiment with a few different toys and, using a toy, mimic your dog's natural play behaviour.

Games

Games fall into four main categories

- Tug of war – toys to use include ruggers and rubber rings
- Chase and retrieve – use balls and Kongs on rope
- Hide, seek and search – can be played with people, toys or food
- Pounce and shake – squeaky toys encourage this type of play

Whatever toys you use make sure they are suitable for your dog. Check the toys regularly to ensure there are no small parts that could be chewed off and swallowed.

Have a selection of toys and swap them every few days to keep your dog interested.

Basic rules of play

- Before you begin to play make sure you can easily take things away from your dog. If not, teach the 'leave' command – see the pet care leaflet, Training your dog (D16).

- Don't play rough and tumble wrestling games or allow your dog to chase children. Both are exciting for your dog but can encourage games that are out of your control.
- Keep toys below waist height so that you don't encourage your dog to jump up
- Have frequent, daily, play sessions at home and when out for walks
- Play in short bursts of up to five minutes and finish whilst your dog is still keen to play
- When playing use an exciting voice with lots of praise and encouragement
- For dogs that are keen to play only start the game when they are doing something you want – such as lying down quietly. This will encourage good behaviour.
- Tidy toys away at the end of each play session
- Never force your dog to play
- Have fun!



Teaching your dog to play

This section is for dogs that haven't learned to play with toys. It may be that your dog has had other dogs to play with or hasn't learned to play with toys as a puppy. The following will help you encourage your dog to play with you and toys.



Only have one dog at a time in the room whilst teaching to play. You will probably have to get down to floor level and keep your voice high-pitched and excited. Don't push the toy towards the dog – especially towards the mouth or face. Instead pull the toy away and cradle it as if it is something special or delicate to peek at, but not have.

Keep turning away from your dog and then occasionally drop the toy and snatch it back. This game will encourage your dog to compete for the toy. When your dog does grab the toy have a short, exciting game of tug of war.

For more sensitive dogs that are reluctant to grab a toy you may be able to encourage them by using an old sock with tiny pieces of cheese in the toe. Start the game when your dog is naturally excited and as your dog pulls at the sock to get to the food you can gently pull back. Encourage your dog with gentle praising, building to excited physical and verbal praise when your dog is more enthusiastic.

Dogs can also be encouraged to play with toys by using a toy designed to have food pushed into it. Show your dog the toy, let your dog sniff the food and then roll the toy along the floor. Your dog will follow it and then be rewarded by being allowed to chew the food out. Your dog will associate the toy with food and will soon enjoy chasing the toy along the ground.

Tug of war

Some people avoid playing tug of war because they worry that it will encourage the dog to be controlling and aggressive. Most dogs find tug of war games very exciting and if this is your dog's favourite game he or she will find ways to play that may be out of your control, for instance grabbing clothing or stealing tea towels. But if you instigate the games you will be able to set the rules.

Encourage your dog to grab the toy by excitedly saying "take it", and at the same time move the toy towards your dog. When your dog has a good hold of the toy keep the interest by shaking the toy side to side, up and down and backwards and forwards.

During the game stop tugging by saying "leave" (once – don't repeat), move your hands into your body, keep them still and don't speak.

Your dog may continue tugging but will eventually release the grip.

Immediately your dog lets go, pause and then start the game again.

For very strong dogs you may find it easier to hold your dog's collar and then let go of the toy, this will reduce the excitement and competition for the toy.

Your dog will quickly learn to play when invited and stop if you touch your dog's collar or when your hands are still and close to your body.

To maintain control, occasionally stop and restart the game – only removing the toy entirely when you have finished.

If your dog tries to grab your clothing, put paws on you or snatches at the toy without being invited then immediately go still and quiet.





Chase and retrieve

Make sure any toys you use are not small enough to swallow (a ball on a rope is safer than just a ball) and don't throw the toy upwards as that may cause your dog to leap up and land awkwardly.

Most dogs love to chase a toy but not all have learned to bring it back. If your dog doesn't bring the toy back to you start by teaching your dog to hold the toy.

With your dog next to you, offer the toy and let your dog pick it up. (Some dogs are more likely to grab the toy if it is rolled along the floor.) Either way praise your dog for holding the toy and only give a food treat if your dog drops it at your feet or in your hand.

Progress to running backwards as your dog picks up the toy so that your dog has to follow you to get a treat. When your dog is enjoying bringing back the toy you can add some control by occasionally throwing the toy, but waiting until it has come to rest before you allow your dog to fetch it.

Repeat lots of times over the next few days and you will soon have a dog that realises if the toy is brought to you and dropped in your hand or at your feet, you will give a food treat.

Hide and seek

The following two games, hide and seek and searching, make use of your dog's amazing sense of smell.

Your dog will use a combination of wind scenting (sniffing the air to locate you) and tracking (sniffing along the ground to follow where you have walked). You might need someone to hold your dog or wait until your dog is in another room then hide behind a door or sofa and call them. (When you first start this game you may need to call your dog more than once.) As soon as your dog finds you, praise and give a food treat.

You can play the same game in the garden or in safe areas whilst out for a walk. When your dog is sniffing and not watching you, crouch down in long grass or hide behind a tree and call them. Remember to be very excited when they find you.



Searching games

Pet dogs don't have to hunt for their food but you can use their skills to find their favourite toy. Your dog must be keen to play with a toy. Start by briefly teasing your dog with the toy and then, whilst your dog is watching, hide it behind furniture or, if outside, throw it into long grass.

Encourage your dog to go and find it by saying in an excited voice "where is it?". When your dog understands the game you can make it harder by not letting your dog watch where you hide the toy.

Remember never to put the toy where you don't want your dog to go – don't hide it in your favourite flowerbeds!

If your dog isn't interested in toys you can play the same game but hide portions of your dog's dinner or tasty food treats.





Pounce and shake

Pounce and shake games are often played independently of the owner. The dog throws the toy in the air then catches or pounces on it. The dog will often shake the toy until the squeak is removed so the games must be supervised. Squeaky toys can be used to get your dog's attention and you can throw them for your dog.





Training

Remember training should be fun too. It keeps your dog's mind occupied and you can use games and food treats to reward good behaviour. For ideas of fun, useful and rewarding things to teach your dog see the following books:

Dog Tricks: Fun and Games for Your Clever Canine

By Mary Ray and Justine Harding

Go Click!

By Elizabeth Kershaw

If you need further practical advice, consider attending a local dog training class. To find a trainer near you go to www.apdt.co.uk.

Happy, healthy pets

Blue Cross advice leaflets are packed full of top tips to help owners with their pet questions. They cover a wide range of topics, from training a puppy to caring for an older cat. So if you need some support to help you with a pet problem, whether it's about a dog or a degu, we're here for you.

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Blue Cross

Blue Cross has been dedicated to the health and happiness of pets since 1897. Abandoned or unwanted, ill or injured – we do what's needed to give every pet a healthy life in a happy home. We're a charity, so the more help you give us, the more help we can give pets.

How you can help

Blue Cross doesn't receive any government funding, so we rely on the generosity of pet lovers like you. There are lots of ways you can help the sick, injured and abandoned pets in our care, like making a donation, fundraising for us or leaving us a legacy.

Please call us on 0300 777 1897 or visit www.bluecross.org.uk



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