



THE GAMES DOGS



By Debbie DeSantis, CPDT

Both mental and physical exercise is very important for your dog's well being. If a dog has too much pent-up energy, training is impossible. Walks and games are ways in which you can provide exercise. Before beginning any exercise or training program, check with your veterinarian to determine the amount and type of exercise your dog should have, according to his health and age.

You can play various kinds of games with your dog, some more interactive than others. I generally tell people not to play tug games. I do so because, unless the dog recognizes you as the alpha leader, many problems can ensue. If the dog feels that it "won" the game, it may also try to "win" other interactions. Only well-trained dogs that will release the toy readily and on command should potentially play tug-type games. There are many other games to play.

I also advise against roughhousing, as it can, in some instances, lead to aggression, or at least to other problem behaviors. In puppies, it encourages the unwanted behavior of mouthing. It can also lead to a dog believing that it "won" a confrontation, which can lead to aggression and other behavioral issues.

Games can give your pup confidence and build the bond between you. They also tire the dog. The old adage that "a tired dog is a good dog" is so true! Games can be educational, not to mention just plain fun!

One fun game that can help with the "come" command is having your pup "find" someone in your family. In the house, or safe,

enclosed yard, hide while someone holds onto your pup's collar. While you hide and call the dog's name, have the person holding the collar ask, "Where's mommy (or whatever name your dog knows)?" The person holding the collar gently releases it immediately when you call the name. Praise profusely the dog when he or she finds you. Even praise the dog for coming to you ("Good come!"). Hide in easy, nearby places at first, then progress to more difficult ones that are further away.

As long as your dog isn't destructive or your puppy has outgrown its destructive chewing phase, you can also hide a small treat or toy under something, such as a pillow on the floor. First, let the dog see you hide it nearby. Tell him to find the treat. Once he gets the idea, you can hide it in more difficult places.

Teach the dog to retrieve. Often, dogs will chase a ball (or other toy), but not bring it back. To teach the dog to return with the ball, at first throw it only a very short distance—even a few feet-away from you. Have a treat or another ball (whatever works for the dog) ready, and exchange it for the ball the dog is holding. Praise the dog for giving you the ball ("Good give"). The game then begins again. If the dog stops too far away, try taking a step away

(first being sure there are no obstacles to trip over) while the dog returns, then stop. The dog should wind up closer to you. Finally progress to throwing the ball (or other toy) farther away, until the pup will return with it and readily give it up to you.

You can also have the pup perform other types of exercises as games. For example, you can buy plastic cones or use empty plastic laundry jugs filled with water or sand and teach the pup to "weave" around them. Depending on the size of your dog, set about six cones about four feet apart in a line. The distance can be shorter for smaller dogs and longer for giant breeds. Then, while the dog is on leash, guide him as he weaves around them. Walk through the line with your pup on a leash a number of times with him next to you while you both weave through the obstacle course. This will also help his leash walking. Eventually, add the word "weave."

You can also purchase an appropriately-sized tunnel for your dog to walk through. For safety, make sure that it's secured and can't roll around. Some people make their own short tunnel by using a new sturdy plastic trash can with the solid end cut out. Make sure that the ends are smooth and can't hurt the dog. To teach him that this is a fun exercise, have someone gently hold the collar with the pup at one end while you verbally coax him to go through the tunnel. Luring him with a treat, then rewarding him with the treat can also help while the pup is learning. Praise profusely and give the pup the treat when it reaches the other side. You can use the word "tunnel" and praise, "Good tunnel," when the pup reaches you.

Another game called "targeting" in which you teach the dog to touch your hand, is useful in real life. Put your hand, palm side flat and facing the pup, a few inches in front of the pup's face. Say, "Touch." When the pup touches the hand with its nose, you praise, "Yes! Good touch!" Give a treat with the other hand. As the pup gets better at the game, you can have your hand higher or lower or moving slowly away.

Of course, basic and advanced training are also important to your dog's mental and physical well being. Teach your dog to sit by using a small treat held just above his nose, moving it slowly backward. Praise and reward him when he sits. Teach him to reliably come while holding the handle of his leash. Say his name and the word "come", showing him a treat as a lure. Praise and reward with the treat when he reaches you. Only call your dog to you for positive things, never for anything negative. Continue your pup's training for life, adding more commands and tricks. Your dog will remain healthier and mentally alert. An old dog can learn new tricks!



In addition to continuing your dog's training in everyday life, there are many other activities you can pursue. You can engage in formal obedience competitions and rally-style obedience, in which you and your dog work as a team performing various exercises, such as heeling through certain patterns, sit-stay, down-stay, retrieving a dumbbell. Another fun activity for dog and owner alike is called "agility." In this game, dogs are trained to go over jumps, through tunnels, through weave poles, over a dog walk, and on many other obstacles.

A great activity for friendly, well-behaved dogs is therapy dog work, in which you visit hospitals, nursing homes, or even schools with your dog. There are even programs in which children read to dogs, as a way to encourage children to read.

Dogs can learn throughout their lives. Mental and physical activity keeps your pup healthy. Training, games, and sports further cement the bond between dogs and their owners. A trained dog is a joy to live with and a tribute to the owner. Let the games begin!

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