

Tug of War

Teaching your dog to play tug-of-war is a good way to burn off some excess energy (maybe on a rainy day?). It also teaches your dog commands that can be used in other circumstances.

To start, pick a toy that has some length. I like a large rope toy with a few knots, about three feet long, to play with my shepherds. It allows plenty of room for both of us to have a good grip. It should be substantial enough to survive some serious tugging and some chewing. Only play tug with the specific toy. Do not turn everything in your house into the tug game.

Present the toy to your dog with some silly enthusiasm and a command to “Take It!” Be excited if he does bite the toy, give it a little tug and a shake and use a command to “Get it! Get it! Get it!” Then let it go so he “wins” and tell him how good he is! If he drops it, start all over again. If he holds onto it take your end and tug some more. The game should be exciting and fun. The “Get it!” command is to keep his excitement level up, it may not be necessary once he learns the game.

Have some fun tugging. Your dog can win and do a victory lap around the house or yard. You can win and do the same lap if you like. Dogs will tug as hard as you let them, or as softly. Your dog can learn to play tug at different levels with different people. He can pull hard and swing around like crazy with teenagers and he can pull and shake just a little with toddlers. The person playing with him should gauge how hard they want to play and not accept any more. This sounds complicated but the dogs understand pretty quickly.

If your dog gets over-excited playing tug all you have to do is stop. Tug is no fun for him alone. He may run away with the toy or offer it to you again; decide if he’s calm enough to try again. If not let him take the toy and when you find it later put it away. Keeping the tug toy under your control puts you in charge of when and where the game is played. This way he’s not shoving the toy in your lap at inappropriate times.

If at any time during the game your dog bites your hand to make you let go, stop the game immediately. He knows what he’s doing, forcing you to let go, you will not allow that type of play. Game over.

The last thing to teach him is to let the toy go. I use “out”. When I ask him to “out”, I have a treat in hand so he will drop the rope and take the treat. Praise “good out”. Then he can “take it” and the game can begin again. More play may be more rewarding than a treat for some dogs.

In my multi-dog life the dogs play tug without me. I supervise the play the first few times to make sure no dog is biting the other to “win”. Any dog who bites is removed from the game. Multiple dogs playing tug appropriately is fun to watch and fun for them.

Have fun and teach him to play by the rules.

