



PLAYING TUG O' WAR

Playing a game such as Tug o' War with your puppy provides a healthy outlet for your puppy's energy, teaches important lessons, has many positive results and is a lot of fun! Here are some of the things playing tug does:

- **Builds teamwork between owner and dog.** It is a cooperative game: You and your puppy against the tug toy.
- **Play is a primary reinforcer/reward.** Dogs are born wanting to interact and play. They don't need to be taught to love playing.
- **Provides a non-food reward.** Play can reinforce a job well-done. For example, you can whip out your tug toy and play a brief, enthusiastic game of tug to reward your dog for coming to you.
- **Can build confidence and overcome fear.** A timid or shy dog can become bolder through learning to play tug o' war. .
- **Teaches important lessons—loads of important lessons!** (See below)

Let's start with the "rules." There are just two simple ones:

Rule #1: *Three strikes and you're out!* This means if your puppy's tooth so much as touches your hand, that's strike one. Here's how it works

- **First time tooth on skin:**
 - Say "Ouch!"
 - Remove the toy for 5 seconds, then return to play
- **Second time:** Repeat as above
- **Third time:**
 - Say "Ouch!" and you're done.
 - The toy goes away and so do you. Playtime is over.

This teaches puppies that they have to control their mouths. They learn it quickly if you're consistent.

Rule #2: *"Give" means let go.* (You can choose any cue word such as "drop it," or "out," but not one you use in a different context) Whatever cue you select, you need to teach it to your puppy (see below).

How to teach "tug"

- Start teaching tug to your puppy using a soft toy such as a felt, braided tug toy.
- Hold your hands close together, placed just a little more than mouth-width apart so that your hands are close to the puppy's mouth on either side. Yes, place your hands close to, but not touching your puppy's mouth. In order to teach Rule #1, you want to **plan failures**—to make it

easy for your puppy to make a mistake so he can learn what *not to do*. The game continues until and unless your puppy breaks Rule #1, or until you want to work on teaching him to give up the toy.

When your puppy pulls on the toy, get into the game—chatter at him, stroke and touch him, even push against him gently. Don't worry if your puppy growls in play. There's nothing wrong with that. Playing tug is a physical game, and touching your puppy teaches him to accept handling when he's excited.

If your puppy seems reluctant to tug, drag the toy enticingly on the floor in front of him, excitedly encouraging him to "get it." When he does grab it, you can increase his desire to pull by letting go when he's tugging—let him win. Then pull gently on the toy again, and let him win again. In this way you build your puppy's confidence and understanding of the game.

How to teach "give"

To teach your puppy to let go, place 2 fingers of your left hand, palm upward, in your puppy's collar under his chin, and hold him in place as you relax the tension in the toy. Keep hold of the toy, but keep it slack and limp. Hold still and wait, saying nothing. Don't worry if it takes a few seconds or longer before your puppy lets go at first. As long as there's no play or fun involved, your puppy is thinking and learning. The instant your puppy lets go, mark his success with "Yes!", release the collar and immediately start to play again, dragging the toy enticingly as your cue to "get it." Your puppy gets the toy back as a reward for giving up the toy. You're also teaching that responding to your cue to drop it doesn't mean the game is over. The lesson is that it's OK to give you things, so your puppy will willingly do so in the future. Repeat this give-and-take several times during your play session. End the game before your puppy gets tired, stopping with her wanting more.

After a week or so of practice, you're ready to introduce a verbal cue for "give" or "drop it." By now your left hand moving toward your puppy's collar is a signal for "give." So at this point say your verbal cue just before you reach for the collar with your left hand. After another week of practice, your puppy should be dropping the toy on your verbal cue, without you needing to hold her collar.

Playing this game with your puppy provides the opportunity to teach so many lessons. Through play, you can teach your puppy one of the most critical lessons he can learn: to inhibit his bite. Dogs naturally use their mouths in play, and they can learn to both moderate the pressure, and to be careful not to allow a tooth to touch your skin. Puppies also learn self-control, learn to handle frustration and to be physically handled. A puppy learns to keep his head when he's excited, learns to switch "on" and "off" at the start and end of the game, and learns to willingly give things up on cue. And finally, playing an active game of tug o' war is a great outlet for your dog's mental and physical energy, teaching the dog that we (humans) are fun, and that reinforcement (a fun reward) can happen at any time. And it's fun for you, too!

As always, if you have any questions, or run into any problems when playing Tug o' War, please contact your Instructor.

This handout is provided to you by Gail Fisher's All Dogs Gym & Inn, where we believe that an educated owner and an educated dog are the best ingredients for a lifetime of mutual enjoyment.