

INSTRUCTIVE PLAY

Every interaction that you have with your dog is a mini training session. Either you are training him or he is training you. What do we teach our dogs when we play with them? Let's take a look at four of the most common games that people play with their dogs.

TUG-OF-WAR – Tug-of-war is a controversial subject among dog professionals. When playing tug-of-war with a dog with dominant tendencies you can inadvertently teach him to be competitive with you, the alpha. In the dogs world this is not leadership; after all, the alpha has an unquestioned right to all possessions. It can also teach that sort of dog that you like to “fight” over possessions. He might like tug-of-war so much that he instigates a game with you by pulling on your clothes or the laundry. However, the average, non-dominant dog can benefit by the exercise and interaction that tug-of-war offers. If you can stop the game, command “give” or “drop it” (the give or drop it command may need to be taught first) and your dog will reliably obey, you can safely add this game to your dog's repertoire.

WRESTLING – This game is just too rough and teaches your dog inappropriate interactions with people. Your dog may decide that all people like this game and begin jumping playfully on small children or Grandma Betty. Frightened strangers can mistake this for aggression.

CHASING THE DOG – Chase games are not fun when you are late for an appointment or your dog has something dangerous in his mouth. Chasing games can also affect your dog's understanding of the “come” command because running away has become a favorite way to interact with you.

FETCH – Many dogs love this game to the point of being obsessed. Other dogs have no idea what you are doing when you throw a ball. If your dog enjoys fetch already or can learn to like fetch, you have a great game to work with. Fetch gives your dog a great workout while you never even break a sweat. Addiction to fetch seems to be the only possible negative.

The best games for your dog are those that reinforce the positive parts of his personality. Here are four that you might enjoy.

BEAT THE CLOCK – You only need your dog for this game. Start by playing with your dog, try to get him good and wound up. Just as he is running and jumping with abandon, give him a quick command like “come” or “sit”. Reward him (with your attention, food rewards can sidetrack him) for complying, even if he did so slowly. Immediately wind him up again, and then give him another command. Make this fun and give the command in an excited voice. Once your

dog has caught on to this game, reward him only when he obeys quickly. Dogs really like the excitement of this game and it teaches them to obey even when their attention span is at its worst.

THE SHELL GAME – For this you will need two empty cottage cheese containers or any other small container that you can hide a tennis ball under. Put your dog into the “down” position and let him watch as you put a treat or a tennis ball under one of the containers. Be careful to keep your dog’s attention during this. Say, “Where is it?” in an excited voice. When he noses or paws the correct container, reward with a treat or a toss of the tennis ball. Your dog will soon catch on to what is expected of him. You can also move the position of the containers slowly to add difficulty. If your dog is really good at this game, you can even add a third container. This game teaches concentration and helps to increase attention span.

ROUND ROBIN – You can play this game with two or more people (O.K., if you only have two people it would be a line robin). Fill your pockets with treats that your dog considers to be special. Give the “come” command, using the voice and hand signal. Reward for obeying, food rewards are O.K. here. Now the next person in the round robin gives the “come” command and rewards, etc., etc. Get excited! Make Fido think he is the smartest dog in the world! Make the circle larger and larger as he becomes more and more dependable. Throw in a sit or two to mix things up. This game obviously reinforces the “come” command.

HIDE AND SEEK – You will need two or more people for this game; kids are particularly good at this. As you hold your dog’s collar, have the other participant make a big fuss over your dog and then run off to “hide” in a close, obvious place. Do not hide completely yet, we are trying to help your dog get the concept of hide and seek first. Release the dog as you say, “go find Hannah”. If he goes right to the “hider”, give him lots of love and attention as a reward. If he is confused when you first let go of his collar, have the “hider” call to him. As the dog gets the hang of this, have the “hider” hide in increasingly more difficult places. When your dog becomes good at this, you can have him seek out family members for dinner. This game actually teaches a new and fun behavior.

Now you have a few options for constructive play that are not so structured that you never find the time to actually play them. Have fun!

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