

SAFE TUG GAMES

The Clinic Team, University of Lincoln Animal Behaviour Clinic

Who can play tug?

Most dogs really enjoy a good game of tug and we have no reason to believe that playing it properly is detrimental to them or their relationship with their families. In fact, research does not show that dogs become more pushy or aggressive when allowed to play tug, even if they are allowed to win games. However no research has been carried out with dogs which already display aggression towards people when they want to keep control of something they have in their possession. For this reason we do not recommend playing tug or similar competitive games with dogs that have any tendency to want to control items by means of growling, snapping or any other aggressive action.

In addition, because tug games can be very exciting for dogs, we generally do not recommend that younger children play them. Of course all children should be supervised at all times when they are with dogs, but younger children we encourage to play retrieve and hide and seek type games rather than tug.

What is a good tug toy?

There are many toys on the market which can be used to play tug-of-war and therefore it is important to select your dog's toys carefully. Tug should be played with toys which are:

- Long enough so that a dog's mouth and a human hand can both hold on at the same time and not be in contact with one another
- The correct diameter that can fit comfortably into the dog's mouth
- Made of a material that is not likely to injure either the dog's mouth or human skin

Every dog is an individual and therefore you may need to try a few toys before you find one that your dog likes, however in our experience most dogs enjoy fleece tug toys.

The rules of tug

Tug should be played with three rules strictly adhered to keep it safe:

- You can only take it when I tell you
- You must give it to me when I ask you
- You may not put your teeth or paws on me when playing

These rules are not about controlling the dog, but about general safety in daily life. We do not want to encourage dogs to think it is fine to grab anything we have in our hands and we need dogs to let go of things they have when we ask them to as sometimes they may have picked up something that is valuable to us or dangerous to them.

Teaching tug

Right from the beginning you need to enforce the no teeth and paws rule. By enforce we do not mean that your dog should be punished if he makes a mistake, simply that if he bites you or bounces off you with his paws, the game ends – you drop the tug and walk away immediately. If you think that that's what your dog wants – to have the toy to run off with, you can attach a line to the toy (one that won't cut you) and as you drop it place your foot on the line a little way from the toy so that he can't take it away. After about a minute, if he has not dropped the toy even though it is "dead" you can gently exchange it for another toy or treat. You can resume the game after a short period when he has calmed down.

If you are struggling with this please seek help from a suitably qualified professional in the field of behaviour or training.

We teach the "take" and "give" at the same time:

- Take the tug toy and show it to your dog in an excited manner – the level of excitement needed will vary with the dog. Do not wave the toy at your dog's face, if he needs encouragement, make it move away from him so that he is stimulated to chase it. When he shows an interest in the toy, offer it to him with the cue 'Take it'.
- Do not let him snatch at it if you have not offered it to him. Should he try to grab it, lift it out of reach until he is calmer and then present it with your "take it" cue
- Play a short game of tug with him. Be careful to tug safely so as not to injure your dog. Vary the level of pull with the strength of your dog and try to pull parallel to the ground so as not to lift your dog up by his neck. With puppies that are teething, tug especially gently so as not to hurt their mouths and put them off tug games for good.
- If at any time he naturally opens his mouth to release the toy, say 'Give' as he is about to open his mouth and praise him / give him a treat for releasing the toy. Re-offer the tug for another game, once again with the "take it" cue
- If he continues to tug on the toy, then after a short while stop pulling and stand still. With your other hand offer him a treat, bringing it right to his mouth if necessary. If your dog is not food motivated, you may need to find an especially tasty treat for this training (sausage, cheese, chicken, liver etc) or alternatively offer another even more desirable toy.
- Wait for him to release the toy to take the treat and praise him. Re-start the game as above.
- Keep these sessions very short so that he is still engaged with the toy when you end the session. When you end the session make sure you provide some scattered treats or another toy to take his interest so that releasing the toy is not a punishment in the dog's eyes (later, once he has learnt the rules this is no longer necessary).
- After a few repetitions, when he starts to release the tug when he sees your hand approaching with the treat, leave the treat out of your hand and have an empty hand approach. As he lets go, praise him and take a treat from a pocket or similar to reward him.
- Once he is reliably opening his mouth for an empty hand, then start to say your "give" cue just before you move your hand forward. He will

learn to anticipate that your cue word means a treat is coming and start to drop on the word alone.

- At this point, for most dogs, restarting the game is all the reward they need and you can discontinue the use of the treats.
- On some occasions you can let him win the game and take the toy away. You can then call him back after a while and ask him to “give” to start the game again. As above, if he runs off and won’t come back with the toy, you can tie a line to the toy so that you can then get hold of the toy again. In such a case you will need to work on his recall (come back to me) cue so that he learns that bringing things to you is good.

My dog doesn’t want to tug!

There are some dogs to whom tugging on a toy simply does not seem to appeal and there is no reason why your dog has to tug. However, as it is a game which can be used to teach other life skills, should you want to encourage your dog to enjoy tugging you can try the following:

- Buy a tug toy with a food pouch in it (often available on agility websites) so that your dog is tugging something that smells of food. Once he is tugging nicely, he can be rewarded for tugging by getting the food.
- An old sock with food tied into the toe can serve the same purpose
- Tying a food containing sock or a toy that your dog really likes to a piece of line (one that will not cut your hands) and towing it along the ground to encourage your dog to chase it often gets dogs interested in the beginning.
- You can also use clicker training to teach tug, so if you are struggling you can try finding a suitably experienced clicker trainer to help you.