

HEY, LET'S PLAY!

How to use playing with your dog to teach self-control, good manners and obedience.

By Dee Ganley & Nancy Lyon

One of the best ways to train your dog is to incorporate self-control, manners and obedience into your play sessions. It's also lots of fun for man and beast!

Most of us don't like to train obedience because our dogs don't like it. The dog appears depressed and unwilling. They may sit when asked, but do it without giving you eye contact. Or they sit so slowly you stop asking. But what happens when you pick up a ball or the Frisbee? Is your dog eager, animated and completely interested in what you are doing?

Dogs aren't complicated. They are dogs. They want to get and to keep good-things-for-dogs and they have nothing to do all day except figure out what works to do this. They believe that "what's mine is mine", but of an even higher order is their drive to make sure that "what's yours is mine". This makes training easy - not hard. Why? If your dog wants what you have (the toy) then you have something to trade.

Most dogs love eating and playing. We control both of these resources so we can use them as "paychecks" for good behavior. Notice I don't say bribes or bait - I said paycheck. So here's your chance to take your dog off welfare and give him the job of good manners which you'll pay for with food and play.

Training our dogs, or cats, or husbands or wives or children is all about two things: getting the behavior we want, when we want it. And it is about getting rid of a behavior we don't want without getting into a fight about it. To change behavior for the "good" we have to reinforce (reward/pay for) what we want our children or our dog to do again. To get rid of bad behavior we have to be sure it doesn't get reinforced or we make an incompatible "good" behavior that we can reward to happen at the same time.

Unfortunately, many dog owners only use limited food treats and lots of mild correction (jerking the collar) to teach good manners. Is it any wonder dogs find obedience training unpleasant? Lets be honest, if you were a dog would you want to sit or lie down for no good reason - just at someone's whim? Wouldn't running around, playing, sniffing, chasing, and digging be lots more fun? This is why the experienced positive reinforcement trainer uses everything that the dog likes to do (eating and playing) as a teaching opportunity and a reinforcer.

Not only is play an effective reinforcer, because play is interactive it makes you the center of all the fun. Think of your play time as though you and your dog are playing a team sport. You have to play cooperatively by rules which won't seem burdensome because the play is so much fun. Dogs love games. They love social interaction. And we know that getting what you want is an important reinforcer. So to train good manners and

to fully engage your dog in your partnership, teach yourself to look for the game that surrounds your dog's toy play. Elaborate and personalize the game. Make the game of toy play the jackpot that constantly reinforces the relationship of joy and pleasure and mutual responsibility.

Let's say your dog loves chasing tennis balls. Start your play training by collecting three balls. Put two of the balls in your pocket and show your dog the third ball. Ask your dog to "sit". If your dog doesn't sit, say "too bad" and start to toss the ball and catch it - teasing your dog by playing with it by yourself. Don't worry if he is jumping around. Use your body to block the jumping on you by walking right into him and gently putting him off balance. Don't knee him, just walk your body into his space (no hands used). Ideally you won't even need to touch him with your body, just keep moving into his space. He'll learn to back up very quickly. Don't worry that he is confused or so excited to play ball that he can't sit still. Just keep showing him the ball and using a gentle body block if he jumps on you. Remember dogs do what works. Very soon your dog will try something besides jumping to get the ball. Say "sit" again, calmly, quietly, with no hurry in your voice or manner. As he starts to sit, immediately toss or roll the ball. You want your dog to realize that all he has to do to get what he wants (you to toss the ball) is to sit. Now when he has the ball, you just stand there and play with the second ball by yourself. Toss it in the air and catch it. Make the game you are playing by yourself irresistible to your dog. When he comes over to try to get in on your fun, ask him to sit. Don't worry if he hasn't dropped the first ball. Just keep tossing your second ball up into the air and "teasing" him with it. Wait till he offers "sit". Toss the second ball the moment he starts to sit. Within a few times of doing this you will be able to use playing with you as a really exciting reward for down, sit, sit/stay, wait at the door - any good manners skills. Your dog will come to realize that self-control means I get to play. If your dog is too rough, is losing self control, is just plain hurting you - say "ouch" loudly and stop playing. When he backs off, start playing again. Watch how dogs tell other dogs they have had enough. When you know your dog well, you will be able to manage the tempo of your play so it never gets out of hand. Whenever your dog just gets too excited, STOP. Wait for them to offer a calm behavior like sitting and then reward their self-control by playing again. Don't nag at them. Don't say anything. Just hold the toy out of reach and let them figure out how to get you to play.

End the game before your dog is bored/tired. Use a clear word and body cue to tell the dog that it's over. Stand straight, look right at the dog and say in a firm convinced voice "we're finished". Take the toy away by exchanging it for a high value food item. Then turn and walk away. Don't let yourself be drawn back into the game. Don't laugh and give in even if your dog finds a funny argument to try to get you to keep at it. You are in charge of the paycheck not your dog. Consistency matters always.

Important: Playing with your dog is fun for everyone in the family BUT no children should be playing with your dog unsupervised. All your children and their friends no matter what age must be taught the rules of play: no biting, no growling, and no jumping up. If this happens, the playing stops immediately. Until your dog learns self-control and has learned the rules of the game, then the adults must be there to act as referee.

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