

Human and Puppy Play

Dogs and people are social creatures. Engaging in activities that are enjoyed together will enhance the relationship between you and your puppy. These activities may be in the form of interactive playing, training, or walking. Training should be fun for the puppy and incorporate play.

One type of human-puppy play is tug. Tug can be an interactive, energetic, and appropriate game to play with your pup. Teaching a pup to enjoy playing tug with you allows the tug to become a useful tool for motivation and reward. When taught correctly, it allows you to contain and control the pup's excitement level. Tug is a suitable outlet for play mouthing/biting and it teaches the pup how to play appropriately with people.

There are a variety of ways to play tug with dogs. Each dog will have individual preferences for the type of toys they play with, how much tugging they like, and how engaged the person is with the play. Some dogs prefer to retrieve the toy and bring it to you without the tug. Retrieving is another form of appropriate play between people and dogs. It too requires monitoring and controlling the excitement level during the game. Regardless of individual preferences in play the welfare and safety of the dog and person should be at the forefront.

Helpful hints:

- 🐾 Use a long tug toy to keep the puppy at a distance from your hands and allow you to stand upright while playing.
- 🐾 Have two identical tug toys. When the puppy releases one, pull the other one out and engage him in play.
- 🐾 The puppy may be on leash for control when teaching tug.
- 🐾 A rope or line attached to the tug is sometimes helpful.

Side note

Teaching a puppy to play tug appropriately will not make him aggressive. Tug can be a physical and mental outlet for energetic dogs. However, do not play tug with dogs that guard objects and/or display aggression with toys. It is not recommended for children to play tug with dogs because the excitement level may be more difficult to control. This should be an adult only game with your dog. There is a risk of accidentally being bitten when playing tug with a dog.

*Created by TEAM Education in Animal Behavior, LLC.
Used with permission by Fear Free, LLC.*



The Tug Game

1. You should initiate and end the game. Have special toys that are used for playing tug that are kept out of the reach of the puppy until play time.
2. Give the verbal cue "take it" and present the tug toy. Move the tug toy slightly back and forth to foster interest or chase. Keep the toy at a level that does not require the puppy to leap high in the air to try to get the toy. Generally, at the puppy's head height or below is a good rule of thumb.
3. When the puppy has the toy in his mouth, engage him in a gentle game of tug. Verbally reward his interest in the tug. Motion should be smooth gentle pulls side to side or forward (toward you). Avoid up and down or jerky movements as they can cause injury to the dog. With young dogs, just a soft tug and release will do. For example, you want to tug--- tug--- tug, not TUUUUUUGGGGGG-TUUUUUUGGGGGG. Use caution when a puppy is teething because his mouth will be sensitive.
4. It is OK for the puppy to "win" the toy. Sometimes release the toy and back away from the puppy while encouraging him to bring the toy back to you.
5. To teach the release of the tug toy on cue: Freeze (stop tugging and any toy movement). Give the verbal cue "drop it" and prompt it with a treat directly under your dog's nose. Reward with the treat for dropping the toy. A marker such as a click or other event marker could be used to mark the precise moment of the release. Pick up the toy.
6. Add the cue, "sit" or "down", and reward the behavior with "take it" and presentation of the tug toy. This helps to control the pup's excitement level while working on manners training at the same time.
7. Repeat the above steps. Eventually, you will delay your presentation of the treat after giving the "drop it" cue.
8. When the game is over, let the pup know by saying something such as, "all done," and engaging him in an independent activity such as searching for treats or playing with another toy independent of you. The tug toy should be placed away and out of sight.



image: Freepik.com