



Playing Without **TUGGING**

By Amanda Shyne, photos by Clean Run except where noted

Animal behaviorists agree that play is critically important in the normal development of all mammals. Animals engage in play for a variety of reasons. They learn life skills, mating behaviors, and social position. Dogs, of course, are no different—they need to play. But dogs' play behavior does differ from many animals in at least two important ways: 1) their play partners are often humans, and 2) their long-term dedication to play is different from many animals that usually stop most, if not all, play behavior once they reach adulthood.

Long-time agility handlers also know the value of play. Play is critically important when trying to engage, motivate, and reward our dogs. However, in the agility world, the word play has become synonymous with tugging. While tugging may be one of the easiest ways to play with dogs, there are many other options which may be effective in engaging, motivating, and rewarding our dogs. I have seen many students struggling with dogs that do not want to tug, dogs that will not tug



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in public, and dogs that are just not motivated by tugging. Although I do constantly encourage these students to continue to train their dogs to tug, I do give them other play options that promote interaction and help alleviate stress in their canine companions.

The following exercises are fun to play with any dog but are particularly relevant for dogs that are not wild about tugging. You will notice that the exercises are more physically demanding for the human and take a lot longer than a simple game of tug. This might explain why tugging is often seen as the only form of play for dog/handler teams.

Caution: Do not play any of these games with dogs you do not know or dogs that have exhibited aggressive behavior.

EXERCISE 1: TOY DRAG

Purpose: This exercise is designed to engage your dog's predatory instinct and get him to chase both you and a toy dragged on the ground. The intent is not to get your dog to put the toy in his mouth (although it is great if he does), but rather for him to run around playing with you and the toy.

Procedure: Begin this game by attaching a toy to a 5'-long rope or pick up a cat toy that already has a lure

attached to a string and a short pole. Cat toys are often fantastic in kicking up both drive and interest in the toys since they often squeak or make some other noise when moved.

Drag the toy behind you as you run away from your dog. In the beginning you might have to move slowly to keep your dog's interest. Your body

position is very important when playing with your dog. (This should come as no surprise to agility handlers!) If you face your dog, you are putting pressure on him, and many dogs are not willing to engage in a playful manner with individuals they perceive as domineering. Therefore, as you move away from your dog, make sure your

body (your chest in particular) is facing forward—away from your dog. As you play this game, remember that your goal is *not* to get your dog to take the toy in his mouth, but rather to encourage your dog to interact with you and the toy. Make sure to stop the toy drag while your dog is still excited by the game and wanting more.



EXERCISE 2: PLAY BOW AND RUN

Purpose: The purpose of this exercise is to use your dog's natural way of communicating play to encourage playful behavior directed at you.

Procedure: This is one of my favorite things to do with my dogs! If you are not used to acting like a dog, or if you're self-conscious, it is good to begin playing this game in a private location.

Begin with some eye contact directed at your dog, then slowly move into

a play bow. We humans cannot replicate the behavior exactly, but dogs seem to understand our intent when we bend over at the waist and continue to maintain eye contact. Then, quickly break the eye contact and run away from your dog. Repeat these behaviors, the play bow and then running away from your dog, over and over again. Play this game for a minute or two making sure to stop while your dog is still having fun.

Most dogs will quickly join in the fun and begin chasing you. If your dog is hesitant, make sure your body lan-

guage encourages chasing and play behavior; your chest is facing away from your dog and your motion is directed away from your dog.



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TUGGING IS AN EXTREMELY IMPORTANT TOOL FOR TRAINING AGILITY, AND EVERY EFFORT SHOULD BE MADE TO ENCOURAGE YOUR DOG TO BE A WILD AND CRAZY TUGGER. HOWEVER, DOGS PLAY IN MANY WAYS AND IT IS POSSIBLE TO REAP SOME OF THE MANY BENEFITS OF TUGGING BY USING OTHER FORMS OF PLAY.

EXERCISE 3: HIDING YOUR FACE

Procedure: Be careful! This game encourages excessive playful behavior, including digging at you, barking, and even nipping. If your dog does en-

gage in any of these unwanted playful behaviors, simply stop the game.

Lay down on the ground and put your arms over your head. Make all sorts of unusual noises such as squeaks, growls, and anything else that can

come out of your mouth. Usually this is enough to pique your dog's attention; however, if it does not, simply use your dog's name to get his attention and then continue making weird noises.



INCORPORATING GAMES INTO TRAINING

As you can see, these games are more difficult to incorporate into agility practice than tugging and because of this they might not be as useful in a class situation. And while both the toy drag and the play bow can be used when training, they take more time and effort on the part of the handler. Regardless, our dogs need to play. Encouraging play in any situ-

ation will improve the relationship between you and your dog and will build motivation. In addition, playing these games will increase the likelihood that your dog will enjoy other games in the future.

I find these games especially useful with my older dogs that have long since retired from agility. My 15-year-old Aussie, Frisby, still wiggles her bum and barks the moment I lock eyes with her and play bow. She

liked to tug as a youngster but as an old lady she prefers me to play bow and play the hide my face game.

Tugging is an extremely important tool for training agility, and every effort should be made to encourage your dog to be a wild and crazy tugger. However, dogs play in many ways and it is possible to reap some of the many benefits of tugging by using other forms of play. 🐾

Amanda has been competing in agility for 10 years. She and her Border Collie Dilly were 2008 and 2009 USDAA Dog Agility Steeplechase finalists at the Cynosport World Games. They were also finalists in 2007-2009 in the Grand Prix at Cynosport, placing 3rd in 2008. Amanda is a tenured professor of Psychology at Bridgewater State University in Massachusetts and teaches classes in statistics, learning, dog evolution, and animal behavior. She is a frequent agility seminar presenter and can be contacted at amandashyne@gmail.com.