

# The Tug of Love


The ties that bind through a healthy game of tug

By Michelle Heald



I love watching the spontaneous tug games that occur between two dogs. Most recently I was watching the rules played out between an older dog and his younger companion. The body language was unmistakably fun with lots of 'play bows', wagging tails and happy bouncing movements. The older dog instigated his junior companion in play by first dashing past him brandishing a rope toy in his mouth.

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A quick game of 'catch me if you can' ensued with the older dog finally teasing junior into taking one end of the toy into his mouth. From there it was all about getting a firm grip and trying to wrestle the toy from the other. Mostly the older dog won paws down but it was sweet to watch him almost throw the game by letting his little nipper friend win. After all a game isn't fun if you're never allowed to win and the older dog seemed to know the rules of engagement with junior.

Tug games for a long time were considered inappropriate play between human and dog. Many trainers considered that playing tug-o-war games encouraged aggression and dominance or even biting. However, playing 'controlled' tug games can be a great play between you and your dog, allowing him to exercise body and mind and providing an outlet for his natural instincts. It's also a great bonding game to play after an exercise session and played correctly, fairly and well, will ensure that you both work up a sweat and have a great workout.

Most well adjusted dogs love a good game of tug but beware playing this if your dog has a known case of aggression. A controlled game of tug can teach your dog some important behaviours like holding, letting go and self-control. Start with a rope toy and seek out the kind that has a soft toy in the middle and looped rope at each end. These are found in most pet stores and choose one that is an appropriate length and size for your dog.



Start the play by tempting your dog through his prey drive. Simply put the toy in front of him and wiggle it a little bit. Stop and then pull along the ground with some more wiggly action. As he gets closer make the toy move away from him. Use a game name like 'wanna tug' and keep trying to get him to engage in getting the end of the toy. Now play a little game of tug. You can teach your dog to give up the toy by the command 'Leave' or 'Give'. Tug a few times and then give the command to Leave. Offer your dog a treat in exchange. Do it over and over again until your dog understands and has learned he will get the toy back. Don't forget to praise the dog every time he obeys your command.

When the dog will not obey the command, walk away and never chase your dog to get the toy back. Anytime your dog grabs the tug without your permission don't start the game. If the dog gets agitated or is playing too rough, give the command 'Leave' and take the tug away to end the game. Your designated tug toy should always be in your control so never leave it lying around for him to play with. You choose when and where you'll both play the game.

Always remember that you're in control and you'll want to win 90% of the time. The other 10% let your dog pal win. Remember that a game isn't much fun if you never have an opportunity to win. Make tug game time fun and upbeat and never start to make growly noises and never, ever play this game at his level on the floor. This is really an adults only game and children should be discouraged in engaging your dog in this activity.

After playing this game you'll probably notice that your tug-o-war pal is pretty worn out and happy to kick back and lounge around soaking up the endorphins. Playing games is just one of the many bonding and enjoyable ways to enjoy each other's company.

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