



THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY

By Lynne Stephens

When you first acquire that new little bundle of fluff, one of the most natural things to want to do is to spend time and play with him. You may take time off work to be with your new family member to help to settle him in. This is a wonderful idea and will certainly make for a much smoother transition for your puppy from the care of his mum and the companionship of all his litter mates.

Unfortunately, however, real life soon starts to take over, holidays come to an end and we reluctantly have to return to the daily grind of working, taking children to school etc. Activities with your puppy often decline during this period. Sadly, his needs for activity do not!

Remember, that puppies, just like all young animals (our children included) are learning all the time. If you are not teaching them then they are likely to be learning by themselves. It doesn't usually take them long to discover which activities bring them the most fun in life. If you are not instrumental in this process, then you may be sure that their discoveries almost certainly will not match your own hopes and dreams for your pup's seamless integration into family life.

As time goes by, your puppy begins to grow up and may look a little more mature and less cuddly. This often leads us to mistakenly think that he should magically begin to "behave" more sensibly and settle for a quick walk in the park, followed by prolonged periods alone, waiting for our return on most days of the week.

Little wonder then that most puppies, lacking the stimulation that their minds and bodies need, begin to make their own amusement – often by discovering activities that seem to be designed to push our human buttons and cause the most distress and disruption in our lives! Imagine how much mischief your children could get into without the mental and physical activities provided by school, clubs and sports activities.

How then can we stop this cycle of destruction and frustration for you and your puppy?

One of the most invaluable tools to help you with this is to own a puppy that knows how and wants **to play with you.**

If your puppy gets his mental and physical stimulation from activities that you enjoy together, then he will be much more inclined to relax. He will also



be less likely to look for mischief when you have to leave him alone or want him to settle with you for an evening by the T.V. sometimes.

What games should I play?

There are many games that you can play with your puppy that you will both enjoy. I have tried to describe a few of these below.

However, as with all games, in order to make them pleasurable for all concerned these will need to be played under control and with proper rules set up from the outset.

General rules for playing games

- Keep some toys special. Save them for the games you are going to play together and don't leave them out for him to play with without supervision. (Use stuffed Kongs and robust chew toys with him when he is alone)
- Always keep your puppy on a leash or long line.
- Start all games in very familiar surroundings with minimal distractions. (Just think where you might choose to introduce your toddler to the joy of reading books. Would you begin inside his familiar and therefore, less distracting surroundings or at the fairground where there are lots of other fun activities to choose from?)
- Gradually increase the level of distractions as you take your games "on the road."
- As the distraction levels increase, decrease the complexity of the games.
- Call him often to play a game with you – (this will help to reinforce your recall training).
- When you are ready to go home, do not call your puppy, just go to him, pick up the long line and head for home.
- Never let your puppy choose to end the game. This must always be your decision.
- Keep the sessions short – leave him wanting more.

Let the games begin:

Tugging games.

Make sure your puppy is attached to a long line or leash

You may have heard that tugging games should not be played with dogs for fear of making them aggressive. Contrary to this, my advice would be that, played with strict rules from the outset, these games can be a source of great fun and stimulation for everyone involved.

If you begin with a very young puppy, tug gently at first and make sure your pup knows that you are also having great fun with the game. If your puppy is very soft or reluctant to tug, you may let him win the toy a couple of times. (



Using a long line helps here especially because then your puppy can't run off and parade around with the toy, creating his own game!)

During the game, occasionally ask your puppy for the toy and reward him for relinquishing it by feeding him a tasty treat and then continuing with another game of tug. This is teaching him that, to relinquish the toy, brings him more pleasure and fun – rather than the more usual scenario “relinquishing the toy means it is time to stop and the pleasure ends!”

If at any time during the game, puppy's sharp teeth stray from the toy to your hand or any other part of your clothing or anatomy, immediately give a shout as though you have been badly hurt and immediately stop the game, turn your back and ignore your puppy completely – giving no eye contact or any other kind of attention. After a few minutes you may try again. Do this consistently every time you play and your puppy will soon learn that the consequence of playing tug by your rules is endless fun. The consequence of making up his own rules, results in the fun coming abruptly to an end.

Note: Be careful if your puppy is teething, not to inadvertently hurt his mouth. This may serve to make him wary of tugging games for the rest of his life.

Fetching games

Remember to keep your puppy on the long line.

You should now have a puppy that enjoys playing **with you with the toy**, you might like to add the additional excitement of chasing and fetching the toy to you. Throw your puppy's favorite tug toy a short distance from you, encourage him to return it to you for a game of tug (this should already be well established) and then to release it for you to throw again. To help encourage him to bring it back to you, you can try running in the other direction.

Do not throw the toy again if he will not engage in a game of tug with you first. It is particularly important that your dog's release to chase is contingent upon him interacting with you first and then being released by you to chase and fetch.

This game is now also extremely valuable in increasing your puppy's motivation to return to you when you call, as you are always a source of great fun when he does. It will also be building up a good habit of asking for permission before being allowed to go and chase anything.

Finding games

Your puppy will be attached to a leash.

Use a toy that your puppy already loves to play with and, at first, get someone to hold him back while he sees where you hide the toy. Let him go and lavish praise, affection and of course, a game of tug / fetch with the toy when he finds it. You can gradually make the hiding place more and more challenging and the toy more and more difficult for your puppy to find. When you are sure that he know what the game is about, add a cue such as “find



it". Soon you will be able to hide the toy in a different room from your puppy, who will love to show off how good his sniffing skills are, as he quickly and enthusiastically seeks out and bring you his treasured possession to enjoy a game with you. For more food motivated dogs, you can also use his favorite treats in some kind of container for him to find. Then have a huge party, feeding him his treats at the spot where they were found.

Taking your games on the road

Your puppy is still attached to a long line or leash

You will have noticed that I recommend starting all of these games inside the house and on some kind of leash or long line.

Once you are happy with your puppy's responses in this situation it is time to take your games on the road. At first this means taking them into your own back yard.

Then, find even more, safe and preferably fenced environments to take your puppy to play these games – maybe to your friends, family or neighbors homes before graduating to the edges of the local dog park etc. Gradually, increase the number of places that your puppy will be happy to give you attention and play games with you. Dogs do not generalize their learning easily, so it will be important to ensure that you start by making the game easy again in each new location until you are sure of having a puppy that is looking to you for his fun and direction in even the most distracting of settings.

By establishing clear rules and controlling the games carefully from the outset, you will be setting yourself up for success throughout your puppy's life.

In conclusion

You must be an integral part of your puppy's experience with toys. If he is left with a never-ending pile of toys to chew up and play with at will and in his own way, you will find it very difficult to convince him that you have any relevance to his fun.

If, however, you are always part of his fun with toys, you will have established a strong and invaluable bond with your puppy and created a powerful reward for use in all your future training

When you do leave your puppy alone, as indeed you must at times, make sure he has such indestructible items as a Food Cube (this can be purchased at most pet stores and provides endless fun and stimulation as your puppy tries to get morsels of food from it during the day) or hard bones that will not splinter.

Good luck and enjoy playing games with your puppy.

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