

# How to Play with Your Dog

By Joann Locher, M.S.

There is an old saying among dog trainers: "You can't teach nothing". It sounds grammatically incorrect, but it means that everything you do with your dog teaches him something. Playing with your dog can be a fun lesson. On the other hand, improper play can inadvertently teach your dog to disrespect you, and may even approach aggression training.

It is important to choose constructive games which will enhance your relationship with your pet. Destructive games make your dog think less of you as a leader. Statistics show that only about one-third of all dogs succeed with their original owners. Many of the failures resulted from improper play which taught the dog to be mouthy, aggressive or ill-mannered.

Families often get dogs for children, but this can be a volatile combination which must be monitored. Children are so energetic that they can excite the dog too much, making him so hyper that he is unpleasant to be around. Teasing, chasing, and keep-away can also make the dog irritable or nervous.

Tug-of-war teaches the dog to use his mouth aggressively with owners. Dogs probably view this game as a test of dominance. Since the dog will play for hours, the owner is often the first one to quit and let go. The dog then trots around holding his "trophy" as if to say, "Wimpo lost again!"

Wrestling or rough-housing is even worse than tug-of-war as inadvertent aggression training. If you are in doubt, visit a training facility and watch protection dogs being attack-trained. Such training often closely resembles the way people "play" with their dogs. One of the best games is fetch. The problem with this game is that it can easily turn into a game of keep-away or tug-of-war because many dogs will not give the object back to the owner. They do not give it back because they learned from playing with their littermates in puppyhood that, if you relinquish an object, it is lost.

You must teach your dog that you are different. Get your dog to retrieve on leash. As he picks the object up, say "Fetch". Then gently pull the dog towards you saying "Come." Put your hand on the object and say "give" as you extract it from his mouth. If he won't release it you can lure it from him with a treat, rewarding him for giving it to you.

Games which teach the dog to come are a good idea. Run from your dog and, as he runs after you, yell "come!" When he "catches" you, reward...then run the other way and repeat. It's like a game of tag in which everyone wins. Two people can also get the dog to run back and forth between them, taking turns at luring and rewarding the dog. Practicing tricks, or any obedience lesson can be done in such a positive manner that it is more like play than work. Another good idea is jogging with your dog, but don't let him overdo.

Dog owners should make a point to schedule a regular, daily play session with their dogs. Researchers have found that play is crucial to the development and well-being of animals. It enables them to practice their skills of hunting and escape. Games can be aerobic workouts which keep you and your dog in shape, and which vent energy that might otherwise be expended in destructive activity such as excessive barking, digging or chewing. Play is entertainment, relieves stress, and helps to build a bond between the dog and owner.