

Agility Toy Land

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Practice Makes Pawfect

Toy play is one of the main types of reward that you see in dog agility. Other reward categories can be food, praise, petting, personal play, or really anything the dog likes; swimming, sniffing, running, etc. We may use food initially to keep the dog in a more thoughtful state as the dog learns new things. Food can be delivered and consumed very quickly, allowing a high rate of reinforcement in the initial stages. But toys have many benefits when training your dog in agility. Because toys encourage activity, they are a great way to increase a dog's speed and enthusiasm once they understand the desired behavior.

There are many ways the dog can interact with different types of toys: tugging, chasing, chewing, catching, etc. Dogs often have favorite toys or types of toys. A Key Point: when playing with your dog, let them 'win' most

of the time. Because who doesn't love a game that you win most of the time. Some dogs may not care for toys. Don't give up hope. There are ways to build toy drive. Or you can use toys that contain food.

Toy play mimics the dogs' normal hunting behaviors: locate, stalk, flush, chase, pounce/grab, shake/tear, eat. With different toys emphasizing different stages of the hunt. You can use different types of toys in different circumstances to enhance the desired result.

When starting with puppies, having a long dangling toy, or a toy on a rope you

can drag behind you, is a great way to get the puppy to start following you and associating you with fun. A flirt pole (a pole with a string with a toy at the end) is another toy that encourages the dog to run after the fleeing 'critter' to catch it. It is essential that the 'critter' moves away from the dog. Bunnies seldom jump into a dog's mouth, so you shouldn't be shoving a toy at the dog's face either.

Adult dogs may love running after a thrown ball or flying disk. Chasing thrown toys is great for encouraging speed and driving ahead of you. When possible, always reward (throw the toy) ahead of the dog at the end of a sequence. This teaches them to keep moving forward over that last obstacle, not turn back toward you (and possibly drop the bar) to get their reward.

Tug toys are a great way to interact with your dog and keep them engaged with you. Let your dog do most of the 'tugging'. Your role is to resist until they give a really good tug, then let them 'win' the toy. This encourages them to put some effort into the play because that is how they 'win' the game. Winning can also consist of the dog pulling you around. Shy dogs may need a long toy so you are not looming over them. You can also keep your body low and turned away to reduce any spatial pressure. When you have a good tugger you can use tugging to reward them all the way back to restart a training sequence. It's particularly effective if you can "steer from the rear" and let them drag you where you want to go.

"But MY dog always runs off with the toy/ball/disk, and never brings it back..." Ask yourself, is this because that is the only way they ever get to keep the toy? See

previous suggestions about letting them win the toy almost every time. You have to teach the dog that they get to continue the game if they bring the toy back. One way to do this is by having 2 (or 3) identical toys. You start playing and the dog 'wins' the toy (chases it down or tugs it out of your hands). Once the dog runs off with it, you whip out the second toy and have a big party with it, tossing it up and catching it, running around laughing with it, making it seem like this toy is sooooo much better than the toy the dog has. The dog should come back (hopefully carrying the first toy) because the best toy is what the other person has. When the dog drops the first toy, you start playing with the dog using the second toy. Hopefully, you can surreptitiously grab the first toy and stash it out of sight. After a short bit of playing, you let the dog win the second toy. If they run off, whip out that first toy and repeat. Eventually they won't run off because they



round of fun.

Eventually the fun must end. A great way to end toy play is to trade the dog for the toy with a treat.

Once your dog learns to bring you the toy for a fun game, you can use a 'dead' toy (just placed on the ground) at the end of the dog's path. Teach your dog a "Get It" cue for clarity about when the dog is allowed to go grab the toy as their reward. (You may also need a "Leave It" cue for dogs who are overly

enthusiastic about toys.)

If your dog loves food, but not toys, then use toys that contain food. A "Lotus Ball" or "Clam" style toy has multiple 'leaves' that Velcro together to hold a treat. The dog chases down the toy, then can rip it open (kill it) to eat the treat. If they don't like Velcro or can't open it, then "Treat Huggers" are soft fabric tubes tied together



that you can wedge a treat between. If you want to

get the dog tugging, use a mesh treat pouch with a handle, so the treats are very obviously in the pouch that the dog grabs. Like with any new skill, take some time to show the dog how they can be rewarded for interacting with the toy/food.

Having a dog that will work for a variety of toys as well as food will expand your ability to find the right reward for the desired result. Need faster weaves? A thrown ball might do the trick. Need to teach a tight wrap? Place a favorite toy along the dog's tightest path. Need to keep your dog totally engaged with you? Whip out a great tug toy. Remember: toy = play, so keep it fun. Your dog will come to see that the agility field is a big Toy Land. Better Practice!



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