

[Increasing Play Drive in Your Dog](#)

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Thanks to the very reinforcing comment from Russia in the last blog post, I decided to translate my latest Swedish blog post into English for my foreign readers. It's about developing your dog's love of tugging:

As we are seeing a lot of new students right now, we talk a lot about developing rewards and mainly tugging. It's very hard to train a dog without rewards and we feel that you need more than one good reward. With our own dogs, we focus a lot on developing both food and play as a reward. This is something that we also want to share with our students. Food is a really good reinforcer if you want to give many rewards in a short period of time, maybe without dog breaking its position at all. Food is also often calming and is appropriate when teaching precision. Play is a good reinforcer when you want speed and intensity, or if you want to throw the reward a long way. Play increases arousal in the dog and brings out new sides to the dog compared to food. It's therefore a great advantage to be able to switch between food and play depending on where you want to go with your training.



We often prefer tugging to chasing a toy, but often use both in combination. If the dog likes to chase a toy, but won't tug, we try to develop the dog's love for tugging so that the dog wants to end the chasing by grabbing, pulling and winning. At many times, we want the dog to grab the toy immediately when it's presented (or when the dog is cued to "get it"). It could be because we want the dog to drive straight to the handler after a turn on the agility course, or to get full speed and focus towards the handlers left side on a recall. Games of chasing, where a toy is dragged on

the ground by a piece of rope, can be a really good reinforcer in other situations, mainly as a jackpot for focus and endurance. But even then, the intensity and joy will be better if the dog really wants to grab the toy.

Not all dogs do automatically like a game of tug. It's a reward that needs to be developed in many dogs. Our opinion is that it always is worth to teach the dog to play if you want to get the most out of the dog you have. The dog might not have to enjoy tugging as much as food, but he should play with high intensity when we present a toy. For some dogs, tugging will be the "motor" in training, the thing that makes training worthwhile for the dog. For other dogs, food will be the "motor", but they can still learn to really engage in tugging between food rewards, so that you're able to gain from all the great things that come with tugging. And with time and good training, the dog's priorities might change.

Shejpa was a dog that often would not tug. Not while food was around, not out doors, not if she wasn't in the mood... I worked a lot with her tugging and it's really good now. I can use 90 percent tugging in training (but she still needs that occasional chicken neck to keep the engine running) and most of the time, you can't tell that it's a "trained" tug. I'm convinced that she wouldn't run half as fast if I didn't use tugging in training. I can also see how tugging is getting more and more reinforcing for her, that she really does enjoy it more and more.



When developing our young dogs, we always have a goal in the back of our heads. We want the dog to grab the toy immediately when it's presented (or cued), tug intensely with weight shift and a straight top line (from head to tail). We want to be able to be passive (moving equipment around, talking to the instructor or student, filling up with more treats) and still have the dog tugging on the toy. If we tell the dog to "out", we want the dog to drop the toy. If we throw a toy or let the dog win while tugging, we want the dog to come right into us and deliver it to hand (we

use a hand touch for this). At the same time, we want the dog to have fun and find tugging reinforcing.

This is a long term goal. It does not mean that all playing must look that way from the start. If the dog prefers to just chase a toy, that's where we'll begin. If we have to be very active to get the dog tugging, we will be. Our first priority is to get the dog to have fun with a toy. I think that good dog trainers have the ability to have a lot of fun with the dog, while reinforcing behaviors that will bring him closer to the long term goal. To reinforce behaviors while playing does not mean that you have to click and treat. It could be that you get more intense when the dog pulls harder, that you let the dog win when he weight shifts. You can find out what your dog really finds reinforcing when playing and use that to reinforce glimpses of what you'd like to see more of in the future. If you reinforce increased intensity in that way, your dog will be more intense and then also enjoying tugging more.

We feel that playing is addictive. You can starve a dog and get him to work better for treats, but it doesn't work that way with playing. Play regularly with your dog to increase his love for playing. But don't play for long. Always end the game when it's at its best and make sure that you are ending the game, not the dog. You want the dog to be a bit disappointed when the game ends, dancing after you to get it to start again. That might mean that the first sessions are so short that the dog doesn't even get to grab the toy, just chase it with high intensity, before it goes away.



Pick the right opportunity to start playing with your dog. You don't want to present a toy and fail in getting the dog to play. It's a common mistake to give up way to fast if the dog isn't

immediately turned on to the game. Some dogs are slow starters in the beginning, but don't give up. Don't try to force the toy on the dog, rather act as if the toy is really valuable to you and you're having a lot of fun with it. Experiment with different ways to get your dog started. Pick really fun toys and make sure that there is a piece of rope or a long handle on it, so that you can drag it along the ground and get it away from your body. Turn away from the dog and drag the toy away.

You can absolutely use food to reinforce tugging and transfer the value from one reward to another. It does require good dog training skills and it isn't my first choice. It is really important that the criteria is raised fairly fast and that the dog is really engaging in the game before the food is presented. To use few, but really attractive food rewards is better than to use many pieces of low quality food. Timing is also really important; make sure that the dog is really into the game of tugging before the reward marker is used. If you use food to reinforce play, it's still important for you to be active and have fun while playing. You want the dog to find out how fun playing can be even without food rewards.

This blog post could go on forever. I'm making it shorter by ending with a few tips in a list. These points have helped me to increase tug drive in my own dogs:

- Start all your training sessions with a game of tug.
- Tug with your dogs for every 3-5 pieces of food you give him in training
- Put running around with the toy on cue and use it to reward good tugging
- Let the dog tug with you before he can have his food at every meal
- Play in many different settings
- Find really good toys (sheep skin, real fur, braided fleece etc.)
- Snatch the toy away from the dog if he loses the toy. Tease him with it for a while before he can have it again.
- Check out Susan Garretts "[How to create a motivational toy](#)".
- Put sticky food (raw tripe, minced meat, liver pâté or similar) into a wool stocking and let your dog chase it. As he grabs the toy he'll get a taste sensation directly in his mouth. (NB! Make sure your dog doesn't get hold of the toy at any time, as it can be dangerous if he tries to swallow it).
- Encourage interest in objects, grabbing, holding and weight shifting in your regular training sessions – train picking things up, retrieving, pulling on dead objects etc. and reward with food. But don't forget the unrestrained, fun play. This is just a complement.
- Don't ever give your dog a treat if he refuses to play (rather put the dog away if you decide to give up).
- Get your dog aroused before presenting the toy. Do restrained recalls, let the dog chase you or wrestle with your dog (if he likes to).
- Believe that it really is possible to get your dog to tug. It is!