Tug of War



Dog owners have been admonished for decades to never play tug of war with their dogs because of the risk of it increasing aggression and/or dominance in the dog. Even many dog resource people such as breeders, trainers and veterinarians caution against this game. This is partly a failure to discriminate between agonistic behavior (conflict resolution & defensive aggression) and predatory behavior. Also, many people have issues about witnessing intensity. Intensity is not aggression, however.

Played with rules, tug-of-war is a tremendous predatory energy burner and good exercise for both dog and owner. It serves as a barometer of the kind of control you have over the dog, most importantly over his jaws. The game doesn't make the dog a predator: he already is one. *The game is an outlet.* It's intense, increases dog focus and confidence and plugs into something very deep inside them. The big payoff is in lowered incidence of behavior problems due to understimulation and a potent motivator for snappy obedience. There is a maxim in training: control the games, control the dog. It's also extremely efficient in terms of space and time requirements.

If tug of war is correctly installed, when you're playing and the dog "wins," i.e. you let go, he will try to get you to re-engage in the game rather than leaving and hoarding. If tug has not been correctly installed, the dog will leave and hoard when he wins. Don't panic about who's dominant when this happens, simply avoid key tactical errors. Play hard to get rather than chasing the dog. Show zero interest or investment in the object. Avoid battles with dogs involving speed and agility - you cannot win. Psych-outs are much better. Pretend you couldn't care less, notice and reward steps in the right direction and be patient. The goal is for the dog to learn that the toy is infinitely more fun when brought to life by you than when dead. Here's how to install the rules.

Tug of War Rules

1) Dog "Outs" on Command

Have a release command such as "out," "give" or "let go." Before revving the dog up to pull on the object for the first time, practice some low-key exchanges with him. The sequence is 1) your command to out, 2) the dog releases, 3) a food reward from your pocket and 4) your command to re-take. If the dog doesn't take the object in his mouth in the first place, practice the exchanges anyway, simply by giving the object to the dog (put it down right in front of him) and then taking it back, giving the reward and then replacing it. Rehearse dozens of exchanges for reward. We want the "give" part strongly primed before anything else happens.

If the dog takes the object and runs away, practice exchanges without completely releasing the object, so that the dog experiences having something taken away,

obtaining a reward and then having it presented to him again. Possessive types stand to benefit enormously from the exchange practice (much like object and from learning that it's more fun to play *interactively* with an object than to have it to themselves. Object guarders must be loosened up with a solid history of exchanges before proceeding with the actual game.

If the dog hangs on and will not out (very common), give the "out" command and then prompt him to out by putting a tasty treat on his nose. This will get things rolling. Once the dog has done a few, hide the reward so that the dog is doing his part of the bargain first, on faith. Continue to food reward all outs and then give the re-take command. In fact, if the dog is a reluctant outer, you will food-reward every out until he 1) outs without hesitation on the first command every time and 2) knows and enjoys the tug game. The re-take will eventually become the reward for outing on command – when he fails to out, you simply pause or end the game. Early on, however, we want lots of successes to get him hooked on the interactive aspects of the game. This way it will matter to him later on when we deliver a time-out penalty. When the dog knows, loves and is hooked on the game, ending it abruptly is by far the most potent motivator against rule-breaking.

2) Designated Object and Compound Take Invitation

This rule prevents the dog from misfiring. Have one toy that you use for tug. Never use anything else. The take invitation consists of this special object PLUS a special command. One without the other should never work. Actively proof the dog: teach him that a) the game never ever works with anything other object even if you give the command and b) the special object only comes to life if you also give the command after presenting it. This rule is to prevent someone from innocently picking up the tug toy and being enthusiastically jumped by the dog. It also avoids him grabbing some other object you're holding because he thought he heard the command. The likelihood of someone presenting the right object and mistakenly saying "make a kill" are pretty remote. Your designated tug toy can double up as a retrieve object or hide & seek target too, but have no other things with which you play tug of war. Limit this activity to one target.

3) No Uninvited Takes or Re-Takes

Invite the dog to take and play as usual. Practice plenty of outs and re-takes. If the dog re-takes *before* you've invited him, give a No Reward Mark ('OH! Too bad!"), then a time-out and then an obedience break. Then invite him to take. This rule infraction is extremely common in tug-of-war games, so don't sweep it under the rug. If he goes for *another* re-take before being invited, i.e. makes the same mistake twice in a row, end the game. This teaches the dog impulse control even when he's Amped Excitement Mode.

4) Frequent Obedience Breaks

Tug of war is one of the great recyclable rewards for obedience training. Alternate back and forth between rounds of tug and brief obedience sequences (1 – 4 commands after an out and before a re-take) to spot check control during the game and to obtain obedience from the dog when he's in Amped Excitement Mode. Every initiation of the tug game is a potent reward that you can use to select a particularly nice obedience response. The dog will try fanatically hard to improve his obedience to get you to restart the game. Through their repeated association over time, the two activities will blur in the dog's mind, eventually making the dog love obedience training.

5) Zero Tolerance of Accidents

When taking the object or re-adjusting their take, dogs will sometimes make contact with your hand or other part of you by mistake. And, sometimes they will latch on to you or your clothing as though you were also a tug toy. Don't let this go unnoticed. Screech "OUCH!" even if it didn't hurt and abruptly end the game. *Game misconduct every time.* Dogs are capable of controlling their jaws with great precision if you give them a reason to do so. The obvious fringe benefits to this rule are that you remind the dog of the sensitivity of human skin and the great necessity to keep their jaws off people at all times, *and* you've installed this while the dog is in Amped Excitement Mode, which is most often where sloppy jaws are a problem.

If the dog is not breaking any of the rules, allow him to get as excited as he wants. This includes head shakes, strong tugging and growling. Once these rules are established, they need to be maintained by constant practice & testing. When things go wrong, it's inevitably because the human slacked off on enforcing the rules.

At the other end of the spectrum from overzealous dogs who need scores of priming to teach them to "out" reliably and constant rule checks, are dogs who are hard to engage in the game at all. These reluctant dogs, very much like reluctant retrievers, are sometimes inhibited, worried types who are apologetic by nature or have histories of punishment for touching or picking up objects. These guys must be built up. They are reluctant to take, hold and hang on. Go for each of these in turn, praising enthusiastically any move in the right direction. The praise, in these cases, functions mostly as a safety cue. You are giving the dog permission to loosen up and act like a dog without fear of reprisal. Reluctant tuggers can be turned around. The extra benefits of the game for these dogs are confidence-building and dissipation of free-floating anxiety. It's no fun being slightly worried all the time.

Tug Rule Summary

1) **Dog Must "Out" On Command**: out-on-command is motivated initially with food rewards and later maintained with re-initiation of the game when the dog outs and a time-penalty or game-misconduct for failures to out

2) **Designated Toy and Compound Start Command**: the game is only played with one specific toy and never with anything else, and there is a specific initiation command

3) **No Uninvited Takes or Re-Takes**: dog must not grab before the initiation command or else face a time-penalty or game-misconduct

4) **Frequent "Obedience Breaks" in the Action**: these are "outs" followed by a bit of obedience (sit-down-tricks) followed by re-initiation as reward

5) **Jaw Prudence**: dog must never knick you or he faces a game-misconduct. Even if you deliberately "feed" a dog your hand, he must go out of his way to avoid it. **No exceptions**