

## Puppy Games for Future Performance Dogs

**Fun games can help your puppy develop important skills.**

*By Maryanne Dell*

Nature and nurture combine to make great canine athletes. Your puppy's genetics are important, but so are socializing and training your pup using positive-reinforcement methods. You can groom your puppy for sports by playing games. The following games also build obedience skills and confidence. If you're planning on an agility career: Teach hand targeting. Place your flat hand a half an inch in front of your pup's nose with your palm up and your fingers together, pointing at the ground. Your puppy will likely bump your hand with his nose. Don't move your hand to touch his nose; wait for your puppy initiate the touch. When he does, say "Yes!" and give him a treat. Repeat until you're getting a solid nose bump. Move your hand an inch farther away. Repeat the process, moving another inch away once your puppy is offering a solid bump. Continue increasing the distance until your puppy is running to you to bump your hand. Hand targeting is the basis of "flatwork," teaching the dog to follow you around an agility course.

If your puppy will be a flyball star: Teach retrieving by playing "puppy ping-pong." Two people sit on the floor about 6 feet apart, each holding a ball behind their back. Person No. 1 restrains the puppy by holding his hips lightly while he faces the other person. Person No. 2 says the puppy's name and shows him the ball, bouncing it to create excitement. Person No. 1 releases the puppy, who will likely run to the ball. When the puppy gets the ball, person No. 1 calls him back (showing him another ball if necessary), then rewards him with her ball when he returns. Reward with the second ball only if the puppy brings the first ball back. Retrieve is the basis for the second part of a flyball run: returning the ball to the handler after getting it from the flyball box. Retrieve is also a great way to exercise any dog at any stage of life – just be sure to adjust the game to your dog's age and fitness level.

If you want to train for dock diving: Teach water games. Let your puppy play with his favorite toy inside a dry wading pool. Add a little water to the pool at each play session until it's full and your puppy is splashing with delight. Dock-diving dogs must love the water, and pairing it early creates that love. Never leave your puppy unsupervised in the pool.

Play is lots of fun and, in addition to setting puppies up to succeed in performance sports, it can also increase the owner-canine bond.

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