

## Dog Agility Play Training

**Have fun with your puppy when training for future agility championships.**

*Terry Long*

All puppies are born with innate play skills. This is often a surprise to people who say their dogs “don’t know how to play” or are not “toy motivated.” In fact, unless a puppy suffers from a neurological disorder, play is part of his hard wiring.

If you’ve ever watched a litter of 4- to 5-week-old puppies, you’ve seen this natural behavior develop. Puppies start interacting with each other very differently than before (when most of their behaviors were focused on eating and staying warm). Play develops motor skills, muscles, and social skills. For predators whose livelihood is based on the ability to track, chase, and kill, the role of play in survival is a critical one.

Our agility dogs don’t need to catch their own meals, but play is arguably the most important skill to develop in performance dogs. There are several reasons for this.

**Social skills.** Dogs that do not play with other dogs after they leave their litters often become reactive when they are around other dogs. Many also display inappropriate social skills, which can cause conflict when their behaviors alarm or annoy well-socialized dogs. Performance dogs especially benefit from early socialization with other dogs because they are surrounded by other dogs throughout their careers. Unfortunately, agility trainers commonly insist that agility dogs never play with other dogs because they believe they will choose to play with other dogs rather than with their handlers. Instead, this should be an issue that a trainer addresses in her training plan.

**Coordination and muscle development.** Play helps puppies and adults develop sprinting and chasing skills and the muscle to support those activities. Littermates often play keep-away, ducking, feinting, sprinting, and stopping on a dime, clumsily at first but with increasing finesse as they practice and mature. We continue the development and maintenance of these physical skills when we play with our dogs.

**Relationships.** Play is a relationship builder. Many human parents understand this and make the time to play games and sports with their children throughout their teen years. Our relationship with our dogs can be similarly fortified by playing with them. It can take some time to release the inner puppy in your dog if he never learned to play with humans when he was a pup. But it is well worth the effort. Daily play with your dog exercises him mentally and physically.

**Play training.** Good trainers know that every training session should feel like play to the dog. This ensures a positive association with training and accelerates learning. A good example of this is teaching a pup a Sit-Stay. Each repetition of a simple Sit-Stay that ends in a game of tug or fetch will result in a dog that loves to do Sit-Stays and sees it as just another game.

**Powerful reinforcer.** Play is a powerful reinforcer when used correctly. Used incorrectly, it can cause over-arousal and poor performance. It is common to see people throwing a ball over and over again or tugging intensely for long periods of time to wear out their energetic dog. In actuality, long periods of free-for-all play may simply take your dog to arousal levels that interfere with his ability to think clearly and control himself. A good example is the dog who is so highly aroused that he drops bars and blows contacts.

Another downside of free-for-all play is that the dog does not learn to work for the toy or play as a reward. We’ve all seen dogs that “lose their minds” when the tennis ball appears. They simply cannot concentrate or perform if they know their handler has the coveted item. If they have a history of chasing or tugging simply for exercise, their expectation is that no performance is required to gain the coveted item. Instead, use that toy as a reward for Sit-Stays, Down on the table, hitting the contact zone, and so on.

Let’s assume that you are just starting to teach your dog to play with you. Where do you begin?

1 Pick an enticing toy that is available only when you play with your dog. An enticing toy might be a long, soft fleecy toy with a squeaker. For many dogs, a toy that slithers along the floor is irresistible – especially if it squeaks. Don’t leave this toy out for your dog to entertain himself.

2 Develop an obsession with this toy. Avoid pushing the toy in your dog’s face. Instead, play with it yourself. Drag it away

from your dog and then pounce on it. Have fun! If you don't look like you are having a good time, why should your dog be interested? Gradually build his interest and then let him get a hold of it for a short time. Then put it away. Dogs respond to the economic theory of supply and demand. If something is too readily available, it loses value. Keep your play sessions short and fun. Keep at it until you can't seem to keep your dog away from the toy as soon as it appears.

3 Use the toy as a reward. Now that your dog is obsessed with the toy, ask him for a simple behavior (e.g., hand target, sit, spin, down), and use the toy as the reward. Gradually increase your expectations. You might ask for several spins in a row or a longer Sit-Stay. You might then put the toy on the ground near your dog after you have asked for the Sit-Stay. Can he wait for your release to get the toy? Now, put it farther away from him while he is in the Sit-Stay, and stand next to him. Give your release and race him to the toy. Can you beat him there sometimes? If you do, I bet he'll try harder the next time. What fun!

4 Take the games on the road. Many dogs will play at home but not in class or at a trial. If you want to transfer any training skill, including play, you need to practice in a variety of locations with a variety of distractions. This can be the most challenging part of play training and many people give up and revert to food as a reward. Try to stick with it and gradually build up your dog's desire to play with you no matter where you are and no matter what else is going on.

If you are interested in the role of play in the development of a variety of species, go to [www.literati.net/bekoff](http://www.literati.net/bekoff). Marc Bekoff, Professor Emeritus of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of Colorado (Boulder), is widely known for his interest and expertise as an ethologist and the study of play. If you want more food for thought about play and some specific exercises to try, pick up a copy of Clean Run's Special Focus Issue: Motivation, Drive, and Self-Control at [www.cleanrun.com](http://www.cleanrun.com).

Now go play with your dog!

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