

Games to Play with Your Pup: Retrieve

This game ties directly with your dog's "natural wiring." Your dog's hard-wired behaviors are predatory and to forage for fun and food. "Find it" games tune into your dog's instinct to find prey or food, mainly using their nose. Some dogs prefer to use their eyes, such as sight hounds, and others are more alert to things that they can hear, such as dogs with erect ears like German Shepherds. Your dog has a natural desire to stalk and rush prey. Rushing is moving suddenly towards prey, hopefully making it turn and flee. Your dog gets a great adrenaline rush from chasing prey or toys that can trigger the prey drive response in your dog.

Retrieve

To get your dog more reliable at playing retrieve, you can either have two objects to throw and alternate them so that your dog is cycling the objects; or you can give a treat reward each time your dog returns the object to you, and then throw the object again. If all else fails, tie the object you are throwing to a long line and reel your dog back in to you!

Also, be sure to say "Give" when trading your dog for another object or food. Using this cue will teach your dog that bringing things back to you, even their coveted toys, results in fun things such as continuing a game of retrieve or by getting a delicious snack.

What if my dog won't bring the object back?

The dog who won't bring the object back is either not trained to retrieve, is playing keep-away, or is a hoarder. Typically, your dog learns to play keep away because she is ignored when she's lying quietly, or when she's picking up or chewing on her own toys, but becomes the immediate center of attention as soon as she picks up something you don't want her to have.

Teach your dog when you give a certain cue, it predicts that you will actively and gleefully start chasing her (such as "I'm going to get you!") and she must pick up the nearest dog toy and run. Try heading her off, tackling, any variation you like. When you've had enough, sit down wherever you are and watch what happens. Your dog, having had a thrilling time, will try to solicit the chase from you. You refuse to bite until she actually brings you the toy and drops it. When she does, flip it to her and start another round by saying "I'm going to get you!"

The piece of information we want your dog to assimilate is that nothing on her part can make you play. The one predictor of your chasing her is the cue "I'm going to get you" and your wiggling outstretched fingers. The only way she can influence your decision is by relinquishing the object.

Practice initiating and ending the game over and over. Your dog learns that when you stop saying "I'm going to get you..." you never chase her, so she may as well wait for the next time you say those magic words.

Anytime your dog tries to play keep away with something that you do not want her to have, ignore her completely – not even a peep. Your dog will not understand why you aren't coming to get her since you both have enjoyed this game before. Instead, just go sit down and wait for the dog to bring you the item. When she does, trade her for a delicious snack or an acceptable toy and then make sure that your dog can't get access to unacceptable items again. Your dog will learn that the only way to get you to play the keep away game is when you say the cue "I'm going to get you." And if she picks up something that she isn't supposed to have you are just going to give her something fun or delicious in return so why not bring it back to you and find out what you have.