

To Play or... Not to Play

Is it okay to let my dog play tug of war?"

"Is tug a dangerous game?"

"Will playing tug of war cause my dog to be aggressive?"

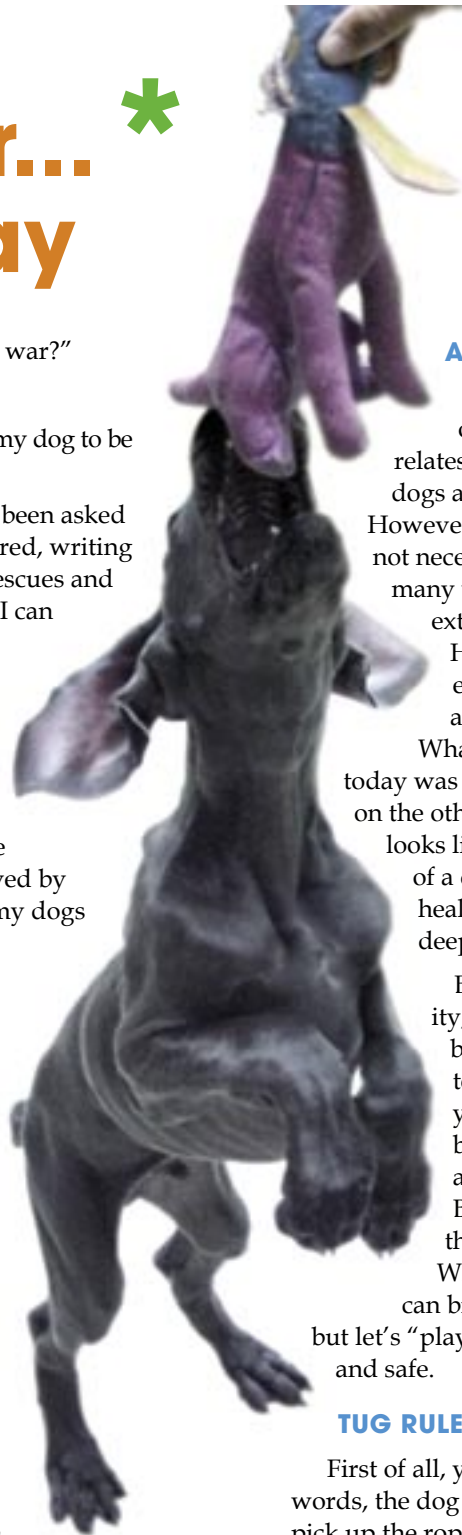
If I had a nickel for every time I've been asked questions like these, I'd be happily retired, writing books, donating my time to local pet rescues and making guest appearances on Oprah. (I can dream, can't I?)

The answer to these questions is fairly straightforward: Yes, in most cases, it's all right to let dogs play tug. No, the game of tug will not create aggression (certainly not in non-aggressive dogs) and, no the game is not generally dangerous — not if played by the rules. Let me explain why I allow my dogs to tug at more than just my heart.

WHERE DID THIS "URGE TO TUG" COME FROM?

Like all very ingrained behaviors in dogs, tugging served a purpose that harkens back to the time dogs lived in the wild and needed to hunt, catch and kill prey to survive. While most dog owners don't like to think of their loving canines in the role of predator, such behavior lies in dogs' pasts; indeed we can see the remnant of these behaviors in some domesticated dogs that, if left on their own, will chase and kill small animals like squirrels or birds.

The prey drive, still very much a part of your dog's interior workings, is where the urge to tug comes from. For many owners, however, this "wiring" is scary and the fear of "activating" predatory urges makes them afraid to play the game of tug with their dogs. Such caution, in most cases, is ungrounded. In fact, to allow your dog to "act out" the prey drive playfully is both safe and incredibly satisfying for your pet — more than almost any other activity. It's important to let dogs play the game of tug — to channel this deep urge in a healthy and controlled manner.



*You Hold the Strings
to Tug of War...*

A TEAM SPORT

Our dogs' origins in the wild also shape other aspects of their current behavior as it relates to tug of war. As most dog owners know, dogs and their wolf predecessors are pack animals. However, most people fail to consider that dogs were not necessarily the swiftest or most ferocious of the many wild animals. Because of this they had to be extremely effective in their hunting techniques. Hunting in packs, dogs could quickly and efficiently catch and consume the prey before a larger or quicker animal would take claim.

What has evolved into the game of "tug of war" today was once a vital activity where each dog depended on the other for survival. While the game of "tug" often looks like the very worst or most aggressive display of a dog's behavior, if played correctly, it is a very healthy way to subvert aggression and channel a deep-rooted behavioral need.

Because tug partly originated as a team activity, it's important for us to recreate some semblance of that "team" spirit, only this time the team will consist of, not a pack of dogs, but you and your dog. It is the dog's innate sociability that cements our relationships with them and it's what we have in common with dogs. Both humans and dogs are social beings and thrive best when in supportive social settings. What better reason to engage in an activity that can bring us closer together? So yes, let's play tug, but let's "play tug by the rules" to keep it genuinely playful and safe.

TUG RULES!

First of all, you must always start the game. In other words, the dog does not get to decide it's a good time to pick up the rope and start smacking you with it in order to get you to play tug. Keep the tug toys in a special place and bring them out either when you feel like playing or when you know your dog needs to expend some excessive energy. If you remain in charge of timing, the game of tug can be as useful to you as it is satisfying for your dog.

Secondly, you must remember to play the game as a collaborative team sport. It's never "you versus the dog." Instead, it must always be you and the dog together versus the object, whatever the object may be — you're playing *with* the dog, not against it.



LET OUT YOUR INNER GROWL

The dog is allowed to growl and vocalize and you may (if you like) do the same. Remember, this is a game and vocalizing is part of the game, not an indicator that the play will escalate into something more aggressive. Growling allows your dog to channel deep instinctive behaviors and to expend energy that is often suppressed and needs to come out. When controlled, vocalization can be fun and does not encourage aggression.

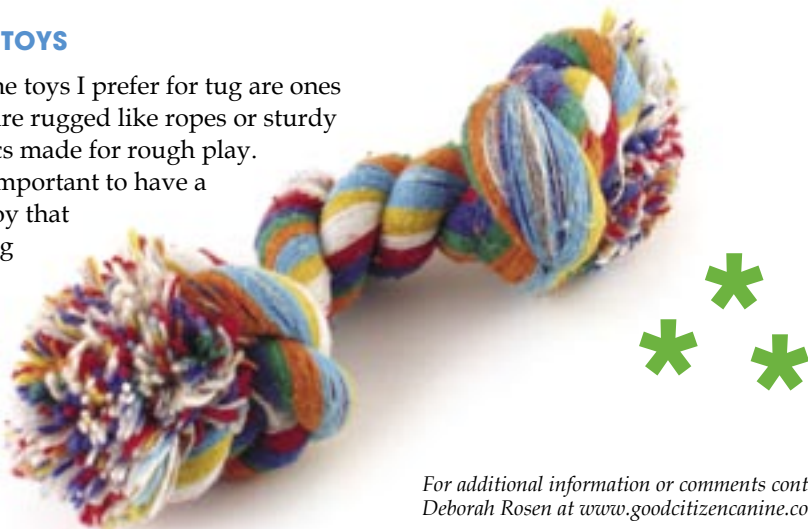
Finally, you decide when it's time to stop playing — when either you or the dog has had enough. While playing, the goal is to maintain your dog's interest in the activity. Keep the game "charged up" so that if he or she seems to lose interest, you quickly stop the game and put the tug toy away. Conversely, if your dog never tires or wants to stop playing or appears to get overstimulated after only a few minutes, it's time to stop the game. Often a good game of tug can be stopped by merely dropping your end of the rope or tug toy. Without the tension created by your pulling, the excitement is gone and the game is over.

BAIT AND SWITCH

Some dogs will continue to pull or start waving the rope around to get you to continue to play. Now it's time to "bait and switch." Get a "high-value" treat (a treat your dog is sure to go for) and offer it to her in a happy voice: "Look what I have!" When she drops the tug toy, pick it up, and then deliver the treat. Quickly put the tug toy away for another time.

TUG TOYS

The toys I prefer for tug are ones that are rugged like ropes or sturdy fabrics made for rough play. It is important to have a tug toy that is long



enough so that, in the event that your dog gets rambunctious during the game, your hand or arm is not mistaken for the toy.

In a pinch, I will take a couple of old socks and tie them together. My two dogs thoroughly enjoyed a couple of old cashmere socks that were no longer of use to me.

TWO DOGS ARE BETTER THAN ONE

The most fun can be when two dogs hook up to play tug. The only thing you need to do, initially, is to supervise the play and make sure your dogs are playing cooperatively. Dogs that have not had prior aggressive tendencies toward one another should be fine playing tug together. With dogs that have a checkered history of fighting, I would advise against letting them play tug unless you are there the entire time to monitor the play. For these dogs, it is better for you to remain at the other end of the tug rope instead of another dog.

The game of tug is an excellent way to give your dog great exercise, superb social interaction with you or each other, and a satisfying and tiring experience. Your new appreciation of how deeply rooted this behavior is will also help you to understand why it is important to play tug, and more importantly, to play by the rules: always be the one to start and stop the game, make sure the game is not adversarial, and put the tug toy away when the game is over. Like every other thing that your dog values highly, be sure you hold the strings — both literally and figuratively.

Now, let the tug game begin! 🐾

For additional information or comments contact Deborah Rosen at www.goodcitizen canine.com.

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