Playing it Safe

Play Tug with Your Dog...The RIGHT way!

The Collared Scholar
**Introduction**

Playing with your dog seems straightforward. You present a toy, and you and your dog play tug-o-war. I mean really, how hard could it be?

But in fact, there are mechanics at play that can make or break your game.

For dogs that aren’t over the top for their toys, neglecting the mechanics of proper play can diminish the value of the game. In fact, it can be easy for dogs to check out, or find something better to do if we don’t get the game right.

Alternatively, for dogs that go crazy for the toy, being haphazard in play can result in serious injury. Plainly stated, toy crazy dogs can be a bit reckless, so getting a handle on their game will help to keep them safe.

Here are the top things you should do to improve your tug game (that many people neglect).

These things, when ignored, can not only cause conflict in the game, but can cause injury to your working, sport or active pet dog.
Why Play Tug?

There is a big misconception floating around that says tug play can create conflict in your relationship with your dog.

However, nothing can be farther from the truth. When implemented correctly, tug play can be an awesome way to boost engagement and build a rock-solid relationship with your dog.

Not to mention, tug play is a fantastic tool to bring energy and drive to training, especially for those who compete in dog sports, who want to add a little oomph to their routines.

Oh yeah, and did we mention, it’s REALLY fun?!?!?

But in order to be effective, you’ve got to get the mechanics of your game right.

Here’s what you need to know.
No. 1: Tug on Your Dog’s Level

When engaging with your dog, you need to play on your dog’s level.

When playing tug, your dog’s back and neck should form a straight line. Not an “L”. Refrain from pulling the toy up to your level as it bends your dog’s neck in such a way, that the game of tug can be really uncomfortable.

Not only that, but playing in this fashion can greatly increase your dog’s risk of injury.

Instead, drop the toy down to about knee level when you play (Be sure to bend at the hips - not at the waist, so that YOUR back remains straight while tugging too!).
If you do pull the toy up, be sure your dog’s weight is supported, and their neck is in line with their back to prevent the risk of injury.

And if you have a small dog, or a dog that is a bit apprehensive about the game, feel free to sit down on the ground. This eliminates the spatial pressure of you looming over them, and can help them feel more confident in play.
No. 2: Watch The Entry

If you are letting your dog launch for your toy, you need to pay close attention to your dog’s entry.

Plainly stated, you need to be careful of how your dog takes the toy.

Your best bet?

Hold it on the side of your body instead of center mass.

If your dog comes flying in with any speed, and your toy is directly in front of you, your dog can easily crash into you, and that can hurt.

But by holding the toy off to the side, it will be easier to absorb the entry. The toy has somewhere to go when the dog hits it, and the dog is less likely to crash into you and get hurt.

Not to mention, the dog will be less worried about taking it, if you are out of the way.
No. 3: Let Go!

If your dog comes in for the toy with any level of intensity, don’t be afraid to let it go when the dog grabs it.

This will minimize the chance of your dog getting hurt.

If you’re hesitant to let the toy go because your dog doesn’t yet like to bring it back, just leave a long line attached to your dog’s collar.

You can let the dog drag the line as you play, and simply pick it up and reel him in should he decide to check out.

Then, trade him for a second toy, for a piece of food or just give him a good ear scratch and some praise when he gets to you.

By giving him positive experiences for bringing toys back, he’ll be much more likely to do it again in the future.
No. 4: Be careful with longer tug toys

If you are playing with a longer tug toy, unless you are experienced, holding the tug handles, or the very end of the toy (for longer rope type toys) can be risky business, and here’s why.

You control the handle. NOT the actual toy.

In order to keep tug play safe, you need to present the exact part of the tug you want your dog to grab.

But with longer toys, it can be easy for the toy to dangle and flail as you hold it by the handles or the very end.

And it can be even easier for your dog to miss the target as it moves more readily when you hold it by the handles.

Opt for shorter tug toys, and for toys with handles, grip the actual toy itself to give you more control and to ensure you are presenting the part of the toy you want your dog to grab.
No. 5: Keep Your Toy Parallel to the Ground

When playing tug, or when presenting a toy for your dog to grab, be sure to hold the toy parallel to the ground.

This way, your dog doesn’t have to turn his or her head when grabbing for it.

When your dog has to twist his or her head during play, it greatly increases their chance of injury, not to mention, it makes the game quite uncomfortable.

Refrain from twisting your dog’s neck in order to keep tug play safe and to ensure the game remains fun for your dog.
Play It Safe!

Tug play is a fantastic tool that we can use to bring energy and motivation to our training, and to give our relationship with our dog a boost.

But if we want to be really effective, we need to pay close attention to our game.

Making the game as comfortable and safe as possible will help to minimize conflict and help our dog to feel more empowered in play.

Play it safe with your dog and don't neglect the mechanics of the game. Your dog will thank you for it in the long run!

If you want to learn more about using engaged tug play in your training, check our our online courses and get out and PLAY with your dog!