TUGGING GREATNESS

🎾 Tugging Greatness E-Book

> Tugging is a relationship game first and a toy game second.

There will be times when you'd love to use a toy to motivate or reinforce your dog, only to discover they have little interest in toys at all.

The good news? That doesn't have to stay that way.

Many people tell me their dog isn't "toy motivated." In reality, most dogs can learn to enjoy toys and tugging. We can create value for toys and build genuine enthusiasm for the game. It simply takes a little observation, creativity and intentional practice.

One common misconception is that finding the "perfect" toy will magically transform a non-tugging dog into a tugging fanatic.

While choosing the right toy certainly helps, the toy itself is rarely the secret.

The real magic lies in the interaction.

You can throw the most exciting toy in the world on the ground, but if you're not genuinely interested in playing with your dog, chances are they won't be either.

Your enthusiasm, playfulness and willingness to engage are what bring the toy to life.

This e-book will guide you through an intentional path to Tugging Greatness.

The first step is discovering what your dog already loves to put in their mouth.

Dogs naturally explore the world with their mouths. Your job is to become a student of your dog. Observe what they choose to pick up, carry, toss or chew and use that

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information to find safe, interactive items that can help jump-start their love of tugging.

🦴 Tugging Assignment #1

Your first assignment is to observe your dog. Study them for one full day, taking notes of all things they love to put into their mouth. These should be things that are appropriate or inappropriate!
This collection will help you to create toy your dog already values.

Observing my dog	
Item	**Details**
e.g. Jogging Shoe	Stolen from the shoe rack, carried around
e.g. Pinecone	Picked up and tossed in the air

The information you can gather from these two examples are:

1. Shoe – used, soft material, easy weight to carry
2. Pinecone – easy to grab, likes to toss

Over the next couple of days, collect 10 things that your dog volunatrily puts into their mouth and take note what action follows e.g. chewing, tossing, carrying etc.

Give your dog options to grab random objects and note down your observations.

Observing my dog	
Item	**Details**

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These options could turn into unexpected toys. Here are a few ideas:

- Cappy
- Pine Cone
- Shower Scrub
- Crumpled Paper Ball
- Toiletpaper Roll (empty)
- Tea Towel
- Face Washer
- Feather Duster
- Fly Swatter
- Dusting Mitt
- Hair Scrunchie

- Old Sock
- Paper Plate/cups
- Bird Feather
- Soft braided T-shirt
- Beef Jerkey (or other protein chew)
- Rabbit Pelt / Sheep Skin
- Old Leather Reins
- Empty Water Bottle
- Stockings
- Sport Sock with Toy/Food in it

You never know what might exicte your dog, use your imagination!

🎾 Commercial Tug Toys

There are many commercialy available Tug Toys on the market. Favourites are:

- Hollee Roller with something inside
- Soft frisbee
- Bungee tug toys
- Braided tug toys
- Food pouch tug toys
- Balls on a rope or bungee
- Cow milker tug toy
- Real animal hide tug toy
- Fake fur tug toy
- Squeaky tug toy

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Tug toys should be interactive between you and your dog, therefore I suggest to soft toys, toys with long handles or with a bungee. The later versions are safe for your joints and you dog's neck!

You can always tie a light line to any of the above suggestions to make the toy move and squiggle along the ground to entice your dog to chase.

🥍 Building Anticipation

We can create interest and curiosity for a toy by creating a trigger before you present the toy to your dog.

- Put the toy into a drawer, easily accessible at all times
- Before each meal, start to act a bit crazy. In a funny voice say things like "What is it?", "Do you want this?" etc. while you act goofy
- Make your way over to the drawer
- Slowly open it while continuing to say funny things
- Stop talking momentarily and pull out the toy with a surprised expression
- With the toy in hand, run into the next room
- Swing the toy above the ground, playing around with it while your dog is watching
- Dance around for a few seconds, toss the toy out like a lure on the end of a fishing pole
- Drag it around but make sure your dog can't get it
- This game should only take 1 – 2 minutes the first time you play
- End your game for one by running back to the drawer, toss your toy in the air and quickly put it back in the drawer. Say something like "oh no, it's gone."
- Proceed with your regular routine
- Repeat this 2 – 3 times a day
- After second day, allow your dog to get their mouth on the toy for a few seconds only (if they're really keen)
- Pull on the cord to try and steal it from them

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- Once you get the toy from your dog in a fun and informal way, play with it by yourself before putting the toy away again in the drawer
- Gradually increase the time your dog can grab the toy, letting him play with you and the toy
- You will soon have a dog that gets excited to see the toy come out
- Make sure your dog doesn't have access to this toy any other time except during this routine.

BUILD THE TRIGGER! BUILD THE ENTHUSIASM! BUILD THE VALUE!

During this time, you should put all other toys away. Only leave out chew toys.
Refrain from giving your dog any verbal cue during these play sessions.
You will soon have a dog that goes nuts for this toy!

🎾 Tugging Mechanics – Your Dog is Ready to Play

Now that your dog loves to latch onto the tug toy, try to mimic a dog when you tug. Your mechanics are important to build this great playful relationship during tugging.

- be on the floor with your dog
- squiggle the toy on the ground
- allow the dog to grab and hold
- let them create the resistance rather than you pulling away
    - this will create trust that the game is genuine
- our primary interaction is a little chattering and using your free hand to engage with the dog through touch
- stay away from spinning, stirring, shaking, whipping or bouncing the dog up and down when tugging
- if you're going to move the tug toy during your session, do so gently from side to side, rather than snapping or jerking the dog abruptly
    - find out what your dog enjoys
- choose times in your day when you have time, are relaxed and can be playful with your dog

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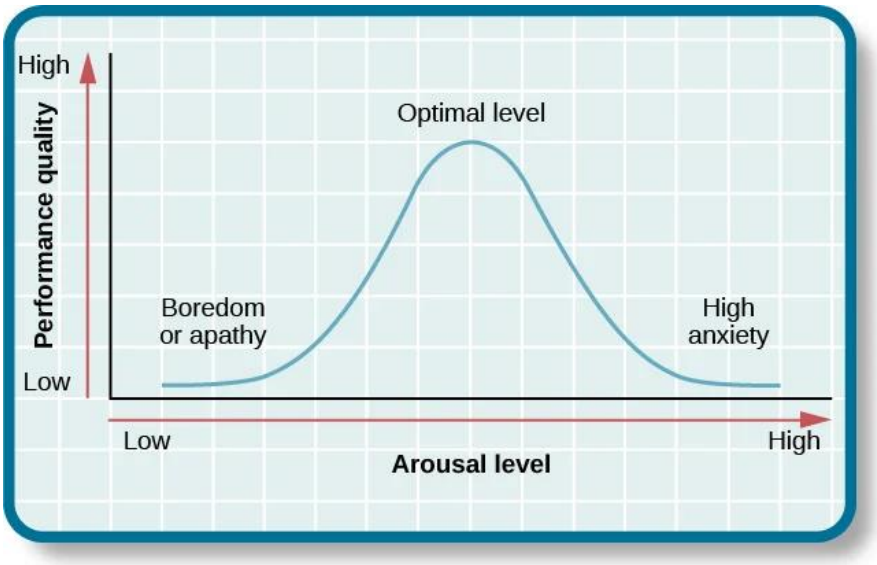
🎾 Playful Touch

- Use your free hand to interact with your dog in ways they enjoy.
- Start with gentle strokes along their shoulders, chest or sides.
- Some dogs enjoy light pats and playful physical interaction during tugging.
- Pay attention to your dog's feedback and adjust your interaction accordingly.
- Grow this to be able to touch your dog over their body with palyful pats.

🎾 Why Arousal Matters



"The concept of optimal arousal in relation to performance task is dpcited here. Performance is maximized at the optimal level of arousal, and it tapers off during under- and overarousal." By Charlotte Nickerson, 2025, https://www.simplypsychology.org/what-is-the-yerkes-dodson-law.html

Tugging is an exciting game. If your dog is tired, disengaged or emotionally flat, they may struggle to find value in it.

Before working on tugging, consider your dog's emotional state. A short game of chase, restrained recalls or a few Hunting Games can help increase engagement and prepare your dog for play.

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Our goal isn't to create chaos. We want enough excitement that our dog wants to participate, while still being able to think and interact with us.

Ignoring your dog's arousal state will make this road to Tugging Greatness harder. Pay attention to their arousal level and get your dog excited first to grow this game – run around together, play a few Hunting Games.

🎾 How to Avoid Common Mistakes

- Dogs can get quickly overwhelmed when there is too much motion or noise from our end. You might have caught yourself, waving the toy over and over into their face, babbling along non-stop in a loud, screeching voice or being too rough.

- Observe and evaluate what effect your behaviour has on your dog.

- Only praise when your dog is doing something you like.
    - Praising nothing is cheerleading therefore reinforcing – doing nothing

- Giving up to easily
    - you've tried to engage your dog to play a game of tug, working at it for a few minutes without much success
        - stopping and putting the toy away, will teach the dog that watching you dancing around with a toy is tolerable but it doesn't teach to play when you asked to play

- Trying to use food to reinforce tugging
    - this leads to a dog that only tugs if they think you have food with you, eying when your hand will go to the pocket

- Trying to get Duration
    - keep your sessions short and quit long before your dog wants to
    - be greatful for small successes

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- Using tug as a reward too early
    - keep the learning to tug sessions separate from your other training sessions until your dog has great value for the game
    - otherwise you'll run the risk of your dog refusing to tug, which will not put any value into the skill you wanted to reinforce!
        - this will only make you feel guilty and you end up reinforcing your dog with food for the brilliant thing you wanted to reward
            - teaching your dog NOT to tug

- Towering over the dog
    - looming – most dogs do best to be on the floor (maybe even on your belly) with them when you start the process

- Choosing the wrong tug toy
    - find out what your dog really likes to put into their mouth
    - it can also help to choose a toy with a longer handle to give more space – some dogs might be intimidated to tug close to you

- Inappropriate jerky movements
    - making the toy come alive is great to create excitement in your dog but never slowing down to give them a chance to latch on is no fun
    - taking the toy out the second they got it into their mouth will leave them puzzled what just happened
    - inappropriately zipping the toy form the dogs mouth
        - watch the video of being a "bad dog" trainer to create more drive form the dog to "fight" for the toy and how to safely take the toy

- Poor mechanics
    - tugging is prey drive – the love to chase and grab
        - puppies come pre-wired to do this, use this to your advantage instead of "shutting it down" by:
            - making the toy come alive on the floor, moving away from the dog (no bunny will run into your dog's mouth!)

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🎾 Growing the Value for Tugging

During the learning phase, be mindful off any other available reinforcement in your house.

- limit your dog's access to these reinforcers
- pickup other toys around your house
- make tug toys for you and your dog
    - they should only come out for these special sessions
- play when your dog is most active
- experiment with different toys – this will depend on your dog's preference
    - be creative, review your item list, don't be limited to only use commercialy available toys just because you like them
- keep sessions short and fun
- use a positive trigger before each engagement (Video MIN)
    - take a deep breath or blow into your dog's face – this will indicate to your dog something great will happen
    - run away, when you have your dog's attention, snake a long toy along the ground
- energise your dog to get their arousal up
    - game of chase or hold back recalls
    - transition smoothtly into a tug sessions without delay
- be light hearted
    - this is play. experiment and record keep what sparks a flame in your dog

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🎾 A Great Way to Get Started!

Focus on three phases of the game seperately and know which one your dog needs most help with:

- the sensation of biting the toy
- holding the toy
- pulling away

🎾 Contingency

- start with a series of a few quick tugs
    - including pulling the toy out of their mouth in between
    - let your dog chase the toy from one side of your body to the other
    - pick up the toy
    - hold your dog by their chest, slightly pushing them away
    - slam your toy on the ground on the opposite side of your body, telling them to “get it”!
- Grow the criteria
    - wait until your dog offers “something” before the toy gets slammed for another round of play
    - gather the toy up at your chest and wait
        - even jumping up at you would earn a new game once
        - this will quickly grow into something more like backing away or sitting
        - once the dog does something, praise and say “get it”, turn and run away – watching your dog to keep the connection

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🎾 Create Small Challenges

To make tugging a valuable tool in and outside of your home, setup some challenges in your tugging sessions at home. A dog that has never experienced a bit of stress or failure during the learning phase will never be able to enjoy tugging in new environments or away from home.
You might start by playfully grabbing your dog's muzzle when they tug, or smacking their flanks (see Smack da baby). Then you may add the presence of another person (or dog if you dog is OK with other dogs), put a bowl with food out next to them. Adjus the environment according to your dog's "failures".

🎾 Tugging Away from Home

Whenever you're playing tug with your dog in a public place, make sure to keep an eye on your environment. Watching another dog tug can be very exciting for onlookers, you want to protect your dog during the game (they are quite vulnerable during the game, being completely focused on you and the toy). Be their eyes and ears.
Split your attention, be in the moment with your dog but also be in the moment of your surroundings.

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