



Building Drive in Dogs

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One of the most important steps to raising a confident dog is to **play tug with your dog**.

People do not realize how important this step is in confidence building. It does not help that there is so much misinformation out there on this subject. Thus, people really do not know what to think. In order to get our protection dog very tug-driven—meaning they go crazy when they see the tug and then they will do anything for it—the owner needs to limit the pet's exposure to it. In most military branches and law enforcement agencies, our dogs were working for a ball. As soon as the handlers pull that ball out, the dogs go crazy for it by spinning and barking and other actions.

So, many people would ask, “How do I get my dog that motivated for a ball?” First, it goes back to breeding and genetics. Some dogs, from day one, just have no interest in tugging or chasing a ball. That is why it is important to know what type of puppy you are getting, and who you are getting it from, to ensure that the puppy will be able to meet the expectations that you have for it.

In order to make your pup highly motivated for a ball, tug, or toy, it is essential that he does not have full access to it. That means that he should have only limited access to that specific toy. If he has access to the ball or tug all throughout the day, he will never be highly motivated for it. Again, a toy to dogs is like money is to you: If you had unlimited access to money, you wouldn't be very motivated to go to work, because there is no incentive. The same principles apply with your puppy—if he has constant access to a toy, there is no incentive for him to “work” for it. A dog will never be too motivated for something he always has—just like people. The ball or tug becomes a new treat—they get it only at limited times, and on special occasions. If you fed your dog hot dogs every day, three meals per day, for one month, they would no longer be considered a treat to him—it is now food. So think about the ball or tug the same way—limited accessibility, and offer it only when they do something deserving of that treat.

Generally, we will give dogs the toy or play tug with them only when they are doing something good. When we are training with them, we will do some

obedience training, then “mark” the behavior (more on this in the training section) and immediately reward them with a quick game of a tug or by throwing the ball for them to chase. As soon as we play tug for a minute or two, we will immediately take the tug back and repeat the training. If we are using the ball, they have it long enough to go get it and bring it back, and that’s about it. If the pup gets the ball and lies down with it, we immediately take it away. Remember, these are not used as chew toys.

One thing to keep in mind is that you do not want to over-train with the tug or the ball. You do not want to keep playing with the dog until he loses interest in the tug or the ball. Stop playing when the dog still wants to keep going. That is what builds up the drive for it. So, when your pup is still in the prime of wanting to play, we will tease them with the ball or tug, and once they get all excited over it, we will simply turn and put it away to end the session. This really helps build their drive. That way, when you go to pull the tug or the ball out the next time, they immediately want it and want to play. By repeating this sequence over a period of weeks, you should really see your dog’s drive building up for these devices.

Let me correct some misinformation about playing tug with your dog. The first myth is that playing tug with your dog can lead to aggression. That is false. Actually, the opposite is true. Playing tug has never led to aggression in any dog I have ever seen or worked with. Again, playing tug builds confidence. As I always say, confident dogs are not the ones biting people. It is generally dogs with low confidence and that are fearful that conduct that type of behavior.

The second myth is that you should always win if you play tug, in order to show that you are the alpha-male, the dominant member of the pack. This is also completely false. Beating your puppy in tug is not something that will teach your dog that you are the leader. What it will do is give your puppy low confidence. Think about it—imagine if you and a friend were to play a game of pool at their house every day after work, and your friend always beat you. How confident would you be in playing pool? Imagine if their friends came over and they always beat you, too. Where would you be on the confidence scale of 1 to 10? That is where your puppy’s confidence would be, as well. Now, think of the same scenario, but reverse the roles. Now imagine that you always beat your friend, every one of their friends, and all of their family members. How high would you be on the confidence scale then? In your mind, you are unbeatable. Losing isn’t even an option, right? Welcome to the world of how police, military, and personal protection dogs think. Your pup should always win in the game of tug!

When you start playing tug with your puppy, make it fun, engaging, and exciting. You should get into it as much as he does, if not more. If you follow these steps, you should see the drive building in your dog within a very short time. 🐾

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