

Why Dogs Should Not Tug: The Truth Revealed

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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SG Tug of war or a game of tugging with a dog is one of the most basic games any person can play with a dog. Yet, some authorities will give you a list of reasons why they believe dogs should not tug. Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog.

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Today we're going to examine that list of reasons. I'm going to share with you what dogs I believe should not tug. And also, I'm going to give you the five most common mistakes people make when they're tugging; plus, I'm going to tell you why I think with most dogs, it's not only okay that you tug, but it's critically important that you do tug.

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So, let's jump right in and start with those dogs that I don't think you should be tugging with. The most obvious are dogs that are injured because tugging is a very physical game. It's very back and forth. And so, if your dog has got a pulled muscle or they're just not right, or they're not feeling well, don't try or don't ask them to tug because chances are they might just do it, and they might make themselves feel a little worse.

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Also, dogs that have had dental surgery recently. Your Veterinarian will probably tell you do not tug with this dog. Dogs that are teething like a puppy that's teething. Some Veterinarians, depending on how those teeth are coming in, will tell you not to tug. If you do tug with a puppy that's teething, I would recommend you choose your toy very carefully, something soft and squishy, and only very, very quick and short sessions of tug.

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Now the final dog that I don't think you should be tugging with is a dog with an unknown history with people. Maybe it's a brand-new rescue dog. You might not want to start off your very first encounter with let's get into a game of tug. Or a dog that has a known history of unprovoked aggression towards people.

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Those dogs, you absolutely should not be tugging. As a matter of fact, those dogs you should be training with a Veterinary Behaviorist. So, assuming a dog is physically, mentally, and emotionally stable, let's jump in and tug. But first, let's go over that list of reasons some people will tell you don't tug with the dog.

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Some Veterinarians will tell a new puppy owner if it's a first-time puppy owner not to tug, and they're just trying to be safe. But I will jump into my list of reasons later on why I think that it can be safe and not only that it can help you to avoid behavior problems with your puppy. But first, the list of reasons. Some of them are just way out there like 'Don't tug with your dog with anything leather, or it'll make them want to chase livestock.' Really?



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Or 'Don't tug with your dog with real fur, or it'll make them want to chase rabbits or squirrels.' You know there's good science and there's flawed science. And unfortunately, where dogs are concerned, a lot of people have really bad math, and they add one plus one, and they get 55. A lot of people believe if you have a sporting breed like a Pointer or a Retriever you should never play tug with those dogs because it will encourage them to have a hard mouth, which means they'll want to bite on the bird hard when they're retrieving it rather than have a nice soft mouth.

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Now I will admit I do not own a sporting breed of my own, but I've had many, many students who have. And they've all played tug with their sporting dogs. And they've all had very soft mouths when they needed to. To the point, they could retrieve not only a bird but also a raw egg.

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My past Border Collie Buzzy was crazy, and he loved to mow all his toys. Every toy I would throw for him to retrieve, he would bite it and bite it and roll it over his feet and bite it unless I picked up an obedience dumbbell. I didn't want him ever to bite that. And so, when I threw it, he knew with that item 'I don't ever mouth.' So, the hard mouth or the soft mouth, even if the dog wanted to use a harder bite, it doesn't mean they're going to do it on a bird.

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But what happens is some dogs naturally have a harder mouth. And if that dog is a birding dog, by chance somebody arbitrarily played tug with that dog as a puppy, they add one plus one and get 55. Another reason people will say is when you're tugging, and your dog is growling, they're rehearsing dominance with you. "Now Susan, I think in [episode number 88](#) you said that rehearsals of anything with my dog need to be avoided if it's a rehearsal I don't want to see repeated."

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Okay. First of all, science has debunked the dominance theory. [Dogs do not try to dominate people](#). It's been proven. It is wrong. Number two, when dogs are playing a game of tug, they are getting aroused. As I talked about in episode number 88, they get more excited, and they get aroused, and they may vocalize growling or maybe barking. But there's growling because "I'm happy" and there's growling because "I'm afraid" or "I'm growling because I'm trying to be a big, tough dog".

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It's not the same. When you say that a tug plus a growl means my dog is going to learn to growl at me is like saying a dog who is aggressive at another dog through a fence should never be put in a fenced-in backyard. Because even if there's no dogs there, the fence is going to make them aggressive. The dog's not going to get aggressive because it's the trigger of the dog, not the fence, that makes the dog want to fence fight.

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So, it's the trigger of the toy that you are playing with that gets the dog excited, and they show their joy with growling. That doesn't mean they're arbitrarily going to start growling at you for no reason. Another myth people say fighting a dog for something they want is going to make them a resource guarder. If you have a dog who's a resource guarder, go and check out [episode number 66](#), where I go into detail what I have done with my puppy This! when she started showing resource guarding.



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Number one thing is pick up all the resources around your house that your dog or puppy may want to guard. If you have a serious resource guarder that potentially will bite you, you should be using a Veterinary Behaviorist. Do not try to deal with this very, very serious problem by yourself. Playing tug does not make a dog want to be a resource guarder.

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And finally, another thing I've heard is that tugging with the dog will make that dog overexcited, and they're going to redirect and bite you or redirect and bite another dog. Now this one has some validity to it. If you're tugging with the dog in a frantic way and the other dogs in your house are running around and getting excited, chances are somebody may redirect that excitement and bite at a dog or that dog might redirect and bite at their person.

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That's a possibility. However, when you play tug with rules, it actually teaches the dog to never do that and way more. Let me share with you what I mean. The quality of our relationship with our dog dictates the quality of life that we have together. Tugging improves that relationship because it helps establish boundaries.

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The number one rule of tugging is you have to know how to stop. So, the number one thing that I'll do when I see that a puppy is interested in a toy that after they're tugging for only a few seconds, I'll bring that toy close to my body. And when the puppy lets go, I instantly give them the toy with the cue, "get it." So, if you do what I want you to do, you get what you want.

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Very quickly, I know that they're going to drop it when I bring it close to my body; I'll gather it up, and kind of hide it in my hands if they don't. So now I'm going to do this; as I'm tugging, I'm going to give them the cue to release the toy, then I'm going to gather it close to my body. And when they do the release of toy, I'm either quickly going to give them back the toy or I'm going to give them a handful of cookies. If they're a dog that really loves cookies, you might do that. More often than not, I will give them back that toy.

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So now I'm establishing for the dog when you tug, and I like to say, "thank you" or "out," or whatever your release cue is, the dog instantly must follow. We're helping the dog understand in our relationship; there's boundaries. If I ask you to do something, you do it. It's just an extension of the game ItsYerChoice. And if you are not familiar with the game [ItsYerChoice](#), I'm going to leave you a link in the show notes so you can learn more about that amazing game. Foundation of everything that I do with my dogs. ItsYerChoice. You've got to start playing it.

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So, I've established for my dogs that when I ask you to play, we can play, but when I ask you to drop the toy, you've got to drop it. There is one super important rule that if you just implemented this one rule in all your tug sessions, I promise you will make your relationship more clear with your dog and make tugging a lot more safe for everyone.



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That rule is this. If any part of your mouth comes off the toy and goes to my sleeve or goes to my flesh or goes to my pant leg, even by accident, I'm going to stop the game. Game over. It's like the emergency stop button on an elevator—end of game. I'm not mad. I don't scold the dog or the puppy. It's just, 'Oh, you hit that spot that means the game goes away for now.' End of game. That is the number one rule of tugging. A dog's mouth coming in contact with my clothing or my skin is inappropriate communication.

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Now, if you play tug with that puppy and then you got up and started walking, and they grabbed your pant leg; if you just stood still, that's an extension of end of game. It's so much easier for my puppies to understand don't grab my clothing if I have tugged with them. They get it so fast. So tugging is brilliant for building and growing that relationship.

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It teaches boundaries. Tug when I ask you to, out when I ask, it teaches very clear communication between you, "your mouth doesn't belong on my body or my clothing". And it also teaches the dog that when I'm tugging with something, and I say, "switch," and I go to another toy, you don't obsess over the one I've dropped.

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You might say, "Oh, I want that one." The puppy might be saying, "Well, no, no, no. I want that one." When they learn to tug with the toy you suggest, it makes them easier to ignore distractions when they are working with you later on in life. Tugging, of course, it changes the dog's arousal state. It gets them more excited, which means they're far more likely to ignore distractions in their environment, which makes it super easy for dog training both at home but more importantly, when you go somewhere else, and you want to engage that dog.

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Now, I'm going to give you a little warning here. Tugging is something that is done in a safe environment. So, of course, I do it at home and in the backyard and in training buildings; if you go to training class or if you go to competitions, you always want to be aware. Sometimes a dog tugging with you and having fun and growling will create arousals in dogs nearby.

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So, before you tug at the park, always be aware if there's any dogs in your environment. Please be safe. Safety first. Safety of the people, safety of the dogs. Okay. The five common mistakes people make when they're trying to tug with their dog. They're really divided into two groups.

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So, the one is the handler's experience, and the other is the dog's experience. If you break any of those rules that I just mentioned that if a puppy bites my hand, you keep tugging, then you are telling your dog that's a fair way to communicate with me. So that ruins the handler experience, especially if you have small children that eventually you would like them to have a role in playing tug with the dog.



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If you've established these clear boundaries, your dog may be able to tug with any kid down the road. Your dog may be able to tug with your children depending on the age of your child of course. The experience of the handler takes a turn for the worst when you don't observe that very important rule.

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Also, you are the one who starts and ends the games, right? So, if you're sitting and watching TV and your dog goes, "Hey, let's tug." and you kind of absentmindedly tug, and then the dog says, "I'm done." and walks away, you are creating different sets of rules. You're telling your dog when it's my time to chillax and watch TV; that's when you can bother me.

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And you're also saying when you and I are playing, a.k.a. working together, you can decide when you want to walk away from work. The handler's experience, it's super important that you keep those boundaries clear for the dog. Number one, you need to make sure that you're initiating the game of tug on a surface where they can get good traction with their paws, their back end in particular.

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So carpeted room, outside on grass, on your couch, or on your bed, if you don't have any carpets anywhere in your house that you use, but somewhere that they can get their confidence in this game in a way that they can get traction on the bed. Number two toy selection, [episode number 55](#), I go into great detail how to select the toy appropriate for the dog that you're training, the age of the dog, and the way you want to use that toy.

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Most importantly is you want to have a toy that allows you to get your hand away from the dog's mouth. A lot of puppies won't tug if your hands are super close. Obviously, it also makes it more dangerous. Now with an established tugger, with any one of my dogs, I can use any size toy because my dogs understood don't ever touch my hands that's holding that toy.

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We've established the rules, right? So, toy selection, super important. The surface you're choosing to play on super important. The third thing for the dog's experience is, don't go at them. So many people, when they're trying to tug with their dogs they go, "come on, get it." And they go towards the dog.

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This is a game that's triggering your dog's prey instinct, the primal drive to want to go and get something. How many rabbits walk up to your dogs and throw themselves in front of them. It's not as exciting, is it? Dogs love to chase rabbits because rabbits run in the opposite direction. So, when you're trying to engage tug, don't push it in your dog's face. Right.

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Either run in the opposite direction or at the very least pull back when you tell your dog to get the tug toy. Okay, and finally, and this one is so critical. This is a big mistake people make, and it could lead to very serious injuries for your dog. And that is your mechanics when you're tugging. So, you want to tug side to side.



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That way, you're going in a way that the dog's neck can bend. So many people, when they tug with the dog, they think that they are shaking out the sheets in the morning. The dog's neck shouldn't be bent back like that. Go with the physiology of the dog so that they can brace themselves. The best thing to do is that you become the anchor and let the dog provide the motion.

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If anything, just do a little snaking of the toy on the ground. Okay. So big things that you can do that help make that experience brilliant for both you, by following the rules that you've established and creating clear boundaries. And for your dog, by having a great surface that they can tug on, by choosing a very appropriate toy, by taking the toy and going in the opposite direction with that motion, and by tugging in a way that supports that dog and doesn't cause them any potential damage to their neck.

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That's it for today. Listen, if you have a challenge that you're facing tugging with your dog, please leave it in the comments for me below. And hey, if there's enough of you that have the same challenge, maybe I'll do a little video to help explain how to fix it. I'll see you next time on Shaped by Dog.

Resources:

[Learn how to play ItsYerChoice](#)

[Podcast Episode 46: Is Your Dog Trying to Dominate You and What You Can Do About It](#)

[Podcast Episode 88: Barrier Frustration: Help for Fence Fighting, Leash Reactivity and Window Guarding](#)

[Podcast Episode 18: 4 Puppy and Dog Training Games for Acquired Bite Inhibition](#)

[Podcast Episode 66: Resource Guarding: Dog vs Dog Aggression](#)

[Podcast Episode 82: Aggressive Puppy Biting Solved](#)

[Podcast Episode 55: Pro Dog Trainer's Guide to Toy Selection](#)



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About Susan

A world-leading educator of dog trainers, Susan is also one of the most successful agility competitors of the last three decades. She has won multiple Gold Medals at National or World Championship events with every dog she has ever owned over the past 30 years. Susan was one of the very first dog trainers to share knowledge online when she opened her “Clicker Dogs” website many years ago. Susan has helped hundreds of thousands of people enjoy a great relationship with their dogs through her workshops and keynote speaking around the world, award winning books, DVDs, magazine articles, blog posts, podcasts, free dog training and dog agility video series, and online dog training programs.



A natural teacher and an entertaining speaker, Susan is world renowned for her dog training knowledge and practical application of that knowledge. Her understanding of how to apply science-based learning principles to both competitive and family pet dog training has been pivotal in changing how dogs are trained.

Susan is now helping many thousands of dog owners in 82 countries have the best relationship possible with their dogs. The real joy for her comes from bringing confidence to dogs and their owner through playful interactions and relationship building games that are grounded firmly in the science of how animals learn.



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