

How Playing with Your Dog Like a Puppy Can Reduce Fear

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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SG Are you the kind of dog owner who loves to play with your dog or play with your puppy? If not, why not? It's not only a great way to have fun with your puppy or dog; it's actually a great way to teach them lessons. And if you are somebody who loves to play with your dog or play games with your puppy, you are in luck. Because in today's podcast, I'm going to share with you how by just changing one element of how you play with your puppy or your dog could have an astronomical effect on not only how that dog learns but it can also decrease fears and phobias in that dog. And this is particularly important for those of you who listen to this podcast and have any interest in ever playing in the sport of dog agility.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. I want to take you back to 1998. I had a little Jack Russell Terrier. Her name was Shelby. And about the third time she went to the Veterinarian, she was probably 15 or 16 weeks old. She got to the front door, and she put on the brakes and backpedaled, "no, we're going back to the car." and I actually had to pick her up and carry her into the vet clinic.

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And she had her ears pinned back and her tail pinned, and she was cowering. Her eyes were so big you could see the whites under her eyes, and she was just panting and swallowing and panting. You could tell she was not a happy dog. On top of that, her whole body was vibrating. She just shook. And she kept up like that right up until we got out of the vet clinic. And then afterward she was super thirsty, and she had to pee. It was heartbreaking.

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Now I just concluded, "Wow. For whatever reason, my puppy or dog as she grew up is afraid of going to the Veterinary clinic." But it doesn't have to be that way because anytime there's a fear, we can desensitize that fear or counter condition the fear. And those two generally go hand in hand. So, desensitization means you are making the stimulus, giving the dog little inoculations of the stimulus in small, small bouts. And counter conditioning means you're changing the dog's emotional response to the stimulus.

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So, it would be like if we pull up at the vet clinic and I just gave her a big chunk of meat, and then I get back in the car. She wouldn't even have to go in there. So, counter conditioning is part of it, desensitization, making that stimulus, giving her smaller bouts of that stimulus, it might be taking her places and having people just pick up her skin and pretend to give her a needle, but it wouldn't be at a vet clinic.

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So those are things you could have done, however, the way you play with your dog might make desensitization and counter conditioning a lot less important. Stick with me on this. I started observing the way dogs interact with other dogs. When they're wrestling, I mean, my dogs play together all the time. There's a lot of body slamming and a lot of open mouth biting at each other.



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Sometimes some close mouth biting, but it's rare if ever you hear a yelp. If there is an inappropriate bite or body slam, the dog who gets body slammed stops the game. And I look at that the way I look at my relationship with my dog; there's a game on and a game off.

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And for something like playing with my dog, if you watched or listen to [episode number 89](#) here on Shaped by Dog, you'll know that when I play tug with my dogs, there's a lot of rules that get shared between us. And one of them is if your teeth come in contact with my skin or my clothing, that's game off.

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Very much like those puppies that play together, "You hurt me, the game is off. I am not going to play with you anymore." And so, when we play together, you need to alter something that you did. Super important to always observe what's going on with your dog. Now I'm not going to play 'bitey face' with my dog, but how can my puppy be terrified of getting a little tiny pinprick when she's all-out wrestling and body slamming? So, it can't be like she has a very low pain tolerance.

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And so, I used those permissions 'game on, game off' as communication between my dog and me. So, if my dog walks away from playing with me, that's them saying game off, and I need to observe what happened prior to make my dog say, "I don't want to play with you anymore."

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And just like the puppy playing with the other dog, I want to make sure I never touched those buttons that make my dog go 'game off.' I always want them to play 'game on.' They will work towards not putting their teeth on my hands so that they never touch the game off button. So, what can you learn from all of this? Back in 2005, I wrote a book called [Shaping Success](#), and in it, there were a lot of games that I shared that I play with my dogs.

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Now, one of the games was called "*Smack Da Baby!*". And it's just a fun-loving way that I took the physical play that I saw two dogs playing with each other, and I brought it into my relationship with my dogs. Now, '*Smack Da Baby!*' is a stumbling block for a lot of people who read that book or who were involved in any of my training programs, especially if they have small dogs or dogs that are a little bit worried or timid.

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They say, "Do I have to smack the baby?" And I say, "Yeah. It's important because what we need the dog to be okay with is physical touch, physical contact." And '*Smack Da Baby!*' is a really easy way to get them okay with physical touch. Think about all the things that we want our dogs to not be afraid of.

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General grooming, where you have to brush the dog or maybe you want to brush your dog's teeth as we do daily, or you want to look in their ears or clean out their eyes. There's a lot of things that we have to physically touch our dogs for.



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And then we go to the Veterinarian, and somebody the dog doesn't know is physically touching them. So, what can we do about that to not make our dogs just be okay with physical touch, but actually learn to love physical touch by a human being? Enter games.

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Now I incorporate '*Smack Da Baby!*' within the game of tug, and I'm going to share with you what that looks like and how it went very wrong for one of my dogs. So, I play this with rescue dogs that come in here, with puppies; of course, puppies are so easy, first, you have to get them tugging. So, if your dog doesn't tug, stick with me; we'll circle back to that.

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So, we're getting our dog tugging, and they love to tug, and as I mentioned in episode 89, we have all these rules of engagement that we have to be very aware of when we're playing tug. But while I'm tugging with a puppy, what I'll do is, I'll hold onto the tug toy with one hand, and with my free hand, I'll start from the ground, and I'll sort of make a sweeping motion off to my side very far away from the puppy at first.

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And then I'll change hands with that tug toy, make that sweeping motion way up in the air on the other side. And I gradually make that sweeping motion closer and closer until my hand actually sweeps by and touches the puppy. Now, if the puppy doesn't notice it, that's still game on. That means, "Susan, you have my permission to keep playing."

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Now I'm not going to do all of this in one tug session. There's 10 stages I go through, and I will incorporate one, two, or three, depending on the permission I get from the puppy or the dog when I'm playing. Now, assuming that I was able to wave my hand by and brush the puppy, I will then move onto stage two and that I'll be tugging. I'll do a light wave, but then I'll stroke just like patting the dog on the back from the hips back.

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Again, I'll do both hands stroking. Does the puppy or the dog drop the toy and go, "What... what are you doing that for?" If they do, then they're saying game off, and that's where you work. You go back to putting your hands up in the air, maybe touching the ribs occasionally with your baby fingers that go by and working towards trying to stroke them.

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The idea of doing this within a game of tug is that tugging [increases the dogs state of arousal](#), and they're less likely to notice these insignificant things that we're doing, like putting our hand in the air or touching their body.

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This is super important for rescue dogs that we're trying to build trust with or new puppies that we're trying to build trust with. Eventually, they're going to say, "Yeah, you can pat my hips. You can pat my rump, that's okay when you're tugging. I love tugging".



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Then we're going to move to stage three, where we're going to do full-on body strokes. Stroke the ribs, stroke the shoulders, and keep tugging, change hands, I'm going to stroke, I'm going to stroke and stroke. Now puppy says, "Yeah, this is fun." then we're going to move on to stage four. And with most puppies, I'll move to stage four pretty darn quickly. So, I'm tugging with the puppy, and I'll do one stroke and one push with my open palm against the ribs. And puppies love that.

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Remember body slamming each other, a little push. I might get a higher intensity of growl. I might get, "Oh, this is fun." Now, if I get a redirect in that, I push against you, and the puppy goes, "Oh yeah." and they drop the toy, and they grab the hand that's pushing against them; that is me stopping the game. Inappropriate communication with your mouth stops the game. "Oh, okay. I'm gonna keep playing."

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So, we're at stage four; we're moving up towards getting to be able to *Smack Da Baby!* Pushing their ribs, push them from side to side so that they move their feet a little bit to the right, and then they move their feet a little bit to the left, all while they're still tugging with you. Now stage five. We are now not going to just push; we're going to give them a little smack. Now not hard, we're not slapping anyone across the face, it's just a little, you know, attaboy, smack. Start on their rump, smack, smack, smack.

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We are now officially 'smacking the baby.' And you want to smack the baby in the ribs, smack them in the rump back up on the ribs, back on the rump, keep tugging the whole time. I'll incorporate a little bit of a push in the ribs and then a smack on the rump, so we're doing some pushing and some smacking.

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Now the puppy's loving or the dog's loving all of this. Now we're going to go up to stage number six, and that is where I'm going to incorporate a muzzle grab. Now you might be saying, "Well, Susan, when you talked about how to decrease biting in your puppies, you said don't let anybody grab your puppy by the muzzle."

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I did say that as a way of greeting. We don't want puppies to think hands coming towards her face means "bite the hands." But their mouth is busy with a tug toy. So, by grabbing the muzzle, putting your hand over the muzzle, and giving it a little shake, that actually increases the tug drive with most dogs or puppies. That actually gets them super excited.

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So, if you have a dog who isn't really great at tugging, they kind of tug and drop it a little bit and tug and drop; muzzle grab is a great game to incorporate to help increase the intensity of your tug. So, we've got our muzzle grab. Now when you're able to do a muzzle grab, you might do a muzzle grab and then slide your hand very calmly up over their eyes, onto their ears, and just gently pull the ears. Or muzzle grab into a nice stroking over the face. Now, this is where I lost my Jack Russell Terrier mix, DeCaff. She would let me muzzle grab, but when I tried to stroke anywhere near above her neck, she would opt out. "Ah, game off. No, I'm dropping that toy. Game off".



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And so, I would then go back to tug and smack in the ribs and pushing the ribs and smack on the bum and pushing the bum and all that was fine with her. But if I tried to do any stroking or smacking from the neck up, she said, "Oh, nay nay, that is not how we communicate." And I'm like, "Okay, no big deal" I don't worry about it at all. And so, we played just with those first six steps. Now I'm going to carry on before I circle back to what I discovered with DeCaff.

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Step number seven would be smacking in the shoulders. Now you pretty much are smacking that dog or that puppy anywhere, and they are loving it. Now we're going to go to step number eight. We're going to do a smack in the shoulder and maybe even work our way up to smacking them very lightly in the side of the face while they're tugging.

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I don't know why, but when I'm playing this game, I always go, "smack a baby! smack a baby! smack a baby!" And when I'm smacking near their face it always turns into "smack the baby in the face." Now, if we're playing this with a really tiny puppy or a fragile breed like if I was playing this with a Chihuahua or a Pom, or Papillon, I might start smack da baby and stroke, da baby, with one finger.

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I might just stroke with one finger. I don't want to overwhelm any puppy or any dog. You know your dogs better than I do. So it doesn't hurt to try small and gradually increase the intensity of smack da baby. Now we're up to step nine. We've been able to smack da baby all over, push, and now we're going to introduce a little bit of a pinch.

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So, while we're tugging, we're going to just pinch a little skin over the ribs and pinch and pull and pinch and pull. Think of dogs grabbing and roughhousing. You want to pinch a little bit because now it's like sometimes when I'm grooming you, something might, you know, hurt. Like I have to pull ticks out of you sometimes. I hate when that happens.

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But I want the puppies or the dogs to be okay with things that they might feel uncomfortable. This is the greatest way to introduce it. Is in the midst of play where their arousal states high, and they're like, "Whoa! This is fun. I don't know why you're doing that but pinch da baby and smack a baby, that's all so much fun!". And at step 10, you can pinch, you can pull, you can smack just about everywhere on your dog's body, with the exception. And this is something that a lot of people love to do.

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I don't ever grab at puppies' or dogs' paws when I'm tugging because what they will do is pull them away. And for a lot of people, that's a fun game. I don't want my dog when I grab for their paws to want to pull away. That's going to make grooming, nail care, cutting hair around their feet very, very difficult. So, paws are off limits unless when you're tugging, you're just going to hold one. But quite often, the puppies or the dogs are trying to balance and rebalance, so this isn't a great time to be grabbing and holding their paws.



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So, let's just say paws are off limits. '*Smack Da Baby!*' is going to make it so much easier for you, too, if you have to desensitize or counter condition your dog to any touch. It's going to be so easy because you've done it here.

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Now, let me circle back to DeCaff. When DeCaff was around a year old, I decided I was going to teach her how to weave. And for those of you who don't do the sport of agility, there's an element; an obstacle called *weave poles* where there's 12 poles, and the dog has to go in and out of these poles. And it's a lot of fun for most dogs.

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Now [DeCaff was having a lot of fun](#), and she learned how to weave really quickly, but she was bouncing way up in the air between the poles. And I couldn't figure it out. I questioned a lot of the experts that I trialed with on the weekend. We'd all get together and chat about our new and upcoming dogs.

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And I go, "I got this problem..." and I got all kinds of different advice, nothing worked for her. And I thought, "Well, I'm going to just trial her, and she'll get used to the rhythm, and she'll get faster." She didn't. What happened is, she tried to get faster, and she was bouncing so high up in the air that she skipped a pole. And she was quickly learning to not like weave poles.

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And I was frustrated because an average small dogs might take two and three quarters of a second to get through 12 poles. DeCaff was taking four and five seconds to get through those 12 poles. It was frustrating for me. I didn't understand because she was getting very speedy everywhere else until one day, I was teaching a seminar in California.

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It was in the bay area, and a student of mine gave me a little present for DeCaff. It was a tiny little miniature tennis ball on a little rope, and I gave it to DeCaff, and she loved it. She took off in the field, running with it, and as she was running back to me, I noticed the ball as she ran would come up each side of her face because she's holding it in the middle of her mouth.

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And eventually, it actually touched her muzzle, and she dropped it like it was burning her, and then she picked it up again because it was her ball, and she loved it. She'd run a little bit more, and when it would swing and touch her muzzle, she'd drop it like somebody was shooting her. And I instantly realized why she was bouncing up in the air on her weave poles. She wasn't trying to bounce up. She was bouncing away from the poles. "Smack da baby must stop at my neck. I can't have anything touch my face".

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And so, I went back and played smack da baby with DeCaff, just with one finger. Just tugging, tugging, tugging one little finger can I touch your neck and I worked up to being able to smack da baby in the muzzle and I actually took it to a set of weave poles, and I would smack, and I would sing to her.



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“Smack da baby in the poles!” and I’d smack her on her muzzle, and the other side of her muzzle was up against the weave pole, so she learned that the sensation of weave poles hitting her face was something not to be afraid of. And guess what, almost overnight, her weave poles went from four and five seconds to three seconds. And then we just worked from there to get them faster.

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So, it’s amazing the challenge it could cause you if you notice that your dog is uncomfortable and you decide like I did with DeCaff, “I just won’t bother. It’s not a big deal”. It is a big deal. Smack da baby is a fun game that you will want to incorporate in all of your tugging and grow it into other aspects of your dog training. It’s just a great way to communicate with your dog. All of my dogs love it. Every dog, I’ve trained pugs that love it. Every dog I’ve ever trained has learned to love smack da baby.

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What about those of you who say, “Oh, my dog doesn’t tug.” Now, first of all, the first thing I would suggest is let that be a focus of your training. It doesn’t have to be like “I have to get this,” “I must incorporate this into my training.” Have fun, just enjoy the process and work to your dog loving the tug.

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And when your dog loves the tug, then you can build up these other stages. And then when you’ve got smack da baby with a tug, you can incorporate that into your regular training. Now, in the meantime, that doesn’t mean you can’t work at this. Any game that you play with your puppy or your dog right now, any interactive game, try to incorporate a little bit of touch before you throw a ball or touch before you take it back or if you grab the ball, you’re just gonna stroke your dog.

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Build up more and more touch until touch is a regular part of play that you do with your dog. If you’re listening to this episode, you may want to jump into YouTube because I’ll put some demonstrations of each step of *Smack Da Baby!* there in the YouTube video. And while you’re there, go ahead and like the video, and if you’re not a subscriber to the page, subscribe and hit that notification bell so you won’t miss another video from me. I’ll see you next time here on Shaped by Dog.

Resources:

[Podcast Episode 89: Why Dogs Should Not Tug: The Truth Revealed](#)

[Book: Shaping Success by Susan Garrett](#)

[Podcast Episode 86: How to Train Unmotivated or Overexcited Dogs](#)

[Blog Post: Who’s Shaping me?](#)



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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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