

# Episode: #226

## Safe Toys For Dogs And Why To Avoid Tennis Balls And Sticks

### Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

### Transcript

00:00:00

If you have a dog, I hope that dog has got a lot of toys. And today I'm going to talk about toys. I'm going to talk about what toys are my absolute favorite for my dogs to have, and what ones are two of the most popular for most dogs that I absolutely, strongly recommend you avoid.

00:00:30

Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. And I love dogs to have toys, and there's different groupings of toys, like my dogs have access to toys. I have several toy bins around the house for dogs. There's one in the lower level. There's one in my office. There's one in the kitchen. If they want a toy, they can go grab one.

Now, I say that when I have a puppy, I will pick up all those toys so that the puppy learns good habits with toys. What do I mean by good habits? I don't want dogs to chew on toys. There are things that dogs can chew on. Toys that they are meant to play with are not to be chewed on, so I pick up when there's a puppy around, so they don't pick up that bad habit.

00:01:14

Also, I like the toys to be interactive with me and so the toys are special, I bring them out and the puppy plays with them, very quickly. There's toys all over this place and probably by the time the puppy is finished the teething phase, they don't really want to chew on toys. So, most toys can be found anywhere around my house.

Now there are some toys that my dogs like to play by themselves. For example, Tater Salad just loves the jolly ball. He likes to try to roll on it. That's a bit weird. I would think uncomfortable, but that's Tater Salad. There are toys that occasionally they'll play with each other, like they'll have a good game of tug with something that's long between two dogs.

00:01:52

Now, if you've seen Swagger in the back of any of my videos, he's almost always got a toy in his mouth and cow milkers are one of his favorite to hold. But a stuffed animal will do if there's no cow milker around. He just likes to hold them. He doesn't chew them. He doesn't shred them. Occasionally he'll shake them, but that's about it.

When it comes to training, I like toys that can be interactive with me, and so two categories. The short bungees that I can put in my hand, they are great retrieve toy because the dog can race out, grab the toy, race back, and then we can have a game of tug. Or maybe I'll ask the dog to give it to me and I'll ask the dog to do a behavior and then we'll play another [game of tug](#).

00:02:36

It can grow and grow and it's actually [a great form of exercise](#), both the retrieving and the tugging, both for the dog and okay a little bit for you with the throw and the tug, but really more so for the dog. So, for thinking exercise, there's things like hiking or going for a walk or playing sports like dog agility are much better exercise for the dog than retrieving. But it definitely is a form of exercise. So, I like small toys. I like them on a bungee because I think that's great for my back and my joints.



## Episode: #226

# Safe Toys For Dogs And Why To Avoid Tennis Balls And Sticks

00:03:08

And I think it's great for the dog because there isn't that jarring when they get to the end of something that jarring on their neck or their jaw. So, I like tug toys that have a bungee, I'm going to put a link in the show notes to [4MyMerles](#) where I get my tug toys for my dogs.

I also like really, really long ones, and those are ones that I might drag on the ground when I'm getting a puppy to interact with me or if I have a rescue dog that's never played with toys before. I love to get them to chase. The longer the toy, the more likely [more timid puppy or dog](#) is going to want to chase after it. The smaller the toy, the closer to your hand, they're not going to really feel as confident tugging with you. So those are the things that I love to use with my dog.

00:03:49

And there's some great video resources that you can dig more on our YouTube page, there's a playlist about [how to exercise your dog](#), including 20 ways that you can exercise your dog in the house. And if you're listening, that's [podcast episode number 32](#). And if you don't have a dog that retrieves super well, I have a blog post. It's going back a number of years, but there's a blog post on [the stages of how I teach my dog the retrieve](#).

And while you're checking out the podcast episodes, [episode number 55](#) is a full guide to how I source and select toys. So, it's *Pro Dog Trainer's Guide to Toy Selection*. So, there's some resources for you.

00:04:27

Now, let me share with you the toys that I don't like that they are probably up there with amongst the most popular. And number one, I've mentioned this before and I've got a lot of flak, [a viral video on TikTok](#) after I mentioned that I would never let a dog play with a stick. And yeah, most people when they're walking the dogs, they'll be throwing sticks for them. It's just not safe.

Because yes, it happens more often than you'd like to think about it, that the stick might end up a little bit off the ground, the dog goes flying in and it gets impaled in their throat. Or it gets splintered off in their tongue. Sticks just aren't really good for dogs to play with.

00:05:05

I have one of the things my dogs like chew on is like a block of wood that's made for dog chewing, and it doesn't splinter, so it's different. That kind of wood I'm okay with my dogs having, but they just hang out and chew on it. So, sticks are absolutely not something that I would ever throw for a dog, and I strongly encourage you to never throw a stick for a dog. Actually, I would never even let them have it to chew on.

Dogs love to retrieve and so you could say, "Well, my dog loves sticks." They love sticks because somewhere along the way you turned that stick into a toy. You know, Kong makes this really cool, [squeaky stick](#). It's made with, I mean, I don't know if it's plastic or rubber, but you know the Kong brand is a very reliable brand and they're very conscientious about sourcing non-toxic material for all of their toys they have for dogs.

00:05:54

So, if you want to throw a stick, get one of those rubber Kong sticks with or without the squeaky in it. So, no sticks that you find in the forest please. Number two, most popular toy that I strongly encourage you not to use and if you're going to use it, I'll give you some guidelines onto what I recommend, and that is the good old fashioned tennis ball.



## Episode: #226

# Safe Toys For Dogs And Why To Avoid Tennis Balls And Sticks

00:06:13

Now everyone's going, "Oh no, I love a tennis ball." You know, when I got my first dog, I got her really excited about a tennis ball because I wanted to do the sport of flyball. And I watched them play flyball and the dog runs really fast for the tennis ball. But what I didn't notice way back in 1989 was the dogs that are really good at flyball, they go very fast for the tennis ball, but they come back faster.

But if a dog really likes the tennis ball, then once they've got it, they're going to kind of take the slow scenic route back. But that's not really why most people want to play with a ball with their dog. They want it as a form of exercise or as a great retrieve game because I think every single dog should know how to retrieve and should love to retrieve.

00:07:02

I believe so passionately in it I created a program called *Bring Me*, which is the step-by-step video guide to teach your dog how to retrieve. And I have it as a free bonus in both [Home School the Dog](#) and in our [Recallers](#) program. That's how strongly I think all dogs should retrieve. I just don't happen to think it should be a stick or a ball.

So why am I so anti tennis ball? Number one there's various sizes and you choose the wrong size, and it could choke a dog. And that's a very scary situation when the ball actually gets lodged in the dog's throat and they can't breathe.

00:07:39

So that could happen with any kind of ball. I'm not just picking on tennis balls, but most people throw tennis balls because there's so many of them. One of the big reasons I strongly encourage you to not use your regular everyday tennis ball is because a lot of times they're made with materials that are toxic to dogs.

So, believe it or not, here in North America there are absolutely zero guidelines to toxicity levels of anything in dog toys. So, for example with children, I think it's a hundred parts per million, check on that, I could be wrong. That is allowed in kids' toys in North America. I think in Europe it's only 10 by the way so what's that say about us here in North America?

00:08:21

But in dogs it could be like a thousand. There's no regulations. And there was [a study done recently](#) where they tested more than 50% of the tennis balls that they tested had super high levels, like 400 parts per million of lead in the material. So, your average tennis ball, especially if they have any painting on them, not good for dogs, especially if your dog is a dog that likes to chew on the ball.

Now, I'm going to put a little asterisk because there are brands of tennis balls made just for dogs that are safe. For example, Kong. This is my second plug for Kong the company, they are not a sponsor of the show, although if you'd like to be, you could contact us.

00:09:02

The people at [Kong make a squeaky tennis ball](#) and apparently the felt is different than the felt of most tennis balls. And the felt is definitely non-toxic because as I mentioned before, they take their dog toys very, very seriously over there, and they make sure that they're all non-toxic material.

Now, believe it or not, one of the biggest problems with tennis balls for me, is they are super abrasive to the dog's teeth. Partly it's the felt, but partly is they're on the ground.



## Episode: #226

# Safe Toys For Dogs And Why To Avoid Tennis Balls And Sticks

00:09:32

They're picking up little bits of dirt and pebbles and if you've ever had a little piece of dirt under your sandal, you know how annoying that is. Well, the dog's chewing it and guess what, it wears down their teeth. My first dog Shelby, I've spoke about her on the podcast, she was obsessed with rocks, loved to carry, occasionally she would chew on them but very rarely, just carry rocks.

And I have a picture of her from she was 10 years old when this picture was taken, and if you could zoom in on this picture, you can see her canines are pretty still very, very large, even though she carried rocks around. Didn't seem to bother her teeth.

00:10:10

Now in, by way of contrast, if you're watching this on YouTube, I'm going to put up a picture of Kim's 12-year-old dog Switch, his teeth are completely worn down because he is a big tennis ball chewer. So yes, if you had to pick what toy you were going to let your dog carry around a tennis ball or a rock, you'd think I was crazy to say a rock is better. But in this case, it absolutely was better.

Now, Dr. James Anthony, who is a veterinarian dentist, he recommends if you're going to use a ball to use a road hockey ball, which is very plentiful here in Canada, but may not be as easy to find in other parts of the world.

00:10:47

So, I'll talk more about if you're going to use a ball, but really the reasons I don't like it, it's abrasive to the teeth, potentially toxic, potentially a choking hazard. And most of the time when people use a ball, they will throw it either with an apparatus that they can get some real fulcrum speed and distance on it, or I've seen some people use a tennis racket to hit balls out for a dog.

And a lot of the times the dog can't out race that ball. So, the ball is on the ground and the dog dives their face in. That is jarring to their shoulders, that is jarring to their jaw, that is jarring actually if you have a brachycephalic dog, to their eyes as well, because their eyes are getting right down near the dirt.

00:11:30

So, it could be very injurious to the dog's neck, shoulders, and jaw. And so, those are the reasons I do not like to use a ball. But I would say probably one of the biggest ones other than the toxicity, would be it's not interactive. Yes, you can toss it and they can bring it back, but even if you just put that ball on a bungee, it's now an interactive game where the dog can tug on it.

You can still throw it; the dog can pick it up by the rope. If you're going to throw something for the dog, I'd like it to be something that sticks up out of the ground, so the dog doesn't have to dive their face into the ground.

00:12:02

But if you are going to use a ball, here's some guidelines that you can use to keep it safe. Number one, as Dr. Anthony recommends, why not use a road hockey ball? Number two, if you're going to use a tennis ball, throw it in a way that it lands just in front of the dog as they're running.

And so, what happens is it bounces on the ground and the dog can catch it on the bounce. There's no diving their head into the dirt when they're going after a tennis ball. And number three, choose a brand that's specifically made for dogs.



# Episode: #226

## Safe Toys For Dogs And Why To Avoid Tennis Balls And Sticks

00:12:35

The brands that aren't toxic, that are less abrasive, and by all means absolutely don't ever buy your dog toys at a dollar store. Remember I mentioned before, there's no regulation to the amount of heavy metals or any kind of toxins that could be in pet toys.

So be sure that you're sourcing where you get your dog's toys from and avoid things that are super cheap, that came in offshore because chances are, they are the worst thing you could ever want your dog to put in their mouth.

00:13:07

So, interactive toys, that's the one I recommend because it helps build that bond, it helps grow that connection. And use the toys as reward. Dog brings it back, ask them to sit, down, stand, tug again.

Build that bond so that the value the dog has for the fun, the [joy of playing with toys goes through you](#). Does that make sense to you? I'd love to hear from you. Please leave me a comment. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

### Resources:

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

[YouTube Video: 15 Ways To Exercise Your Dog](#)

[4MyMerles Dog Toys](#)

[Podcast Episode 95: How Playing with Your Dog Like a Puppy Can Reduce Fear](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Exercising Your Dog's Body and Mind: Tips and Games](#)

[Podcast Episode 32: 20 Easy Ways to Exercise Your Dog at Home](#)

[Vlog Post: How to Teach a Puppy to Retrieve](#)

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

[TikTok Video: The Dangers of Sticks for Dogs](#)

[Kong Squeezz Stick](#)

[Home School the Dog](#)

[Recallers](#)

[Article: Yikes, Your Dog's Toys May Be Toxic](#)

[Kong SqueakAir Ball](#)

[Podcast Episode 174: Dopamine In Dog Training: Anticipation, Rewards, And The Transfer Of Value](#)





### 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.



### Meet Us Online

- Website <https://dogsthat.com>
- Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/SusanGarrettDogAgility/>
- Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/SusanGarrettDogsThat/>
- TikTok <https://www.tiktok.com/@dogsthat>
- LinkedIn <https://www.linkedin.com/company/dogsthat>
- Pinterest <https://pinterest.ca/dogsthatcom/>
- Twitter <https://twitter.com/susangarrett>
- YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/c/DogsThat>
- YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/user/ClickerDogs>

