

50

TRICKS TO TEACH YOUR DOG

Sophie Collins

Amaze your friends! Impress your family!
Challenge your dog!





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Introduction

Most dogs have a favorite game and most can perform at least one type of trick—even if it is just “Fetch.” Maybe your dog loves playing this so much that you’ve never tried much else, or maybe he’s a squeaky toy enthusiast who hasn’t shown huge enthusiasm for other ideas he’s been introduced to. But does this matter? Does he actually need a repertoire of different things to play at and learn to do?

The short answer is “yes.” Your dog will benefit from learning to do different things and play a variety of games, and he’ll get a lot out of the opportunity to interact with you, too. Dogs, along with humans, are one of comparatively few species of mammal that carry on playing into maturity, and there’s evidence that they use play to learn and destress, as well as to engage with others. Plus, new games and tricks can help to keep boredom at bay—and dogs need to use their minds, as well as exercise their bodies, to stay happy and healthy.



Best of all, teaching your dog reinforces your role in his life as his mentor, the person through whom good things (rewards, fun, games) come, and the one he looks to for guidance in difficult situations. This last can be particularly useful if your dog tends toward independence and you'd prefer that he checked back with you more often than he does. If he's used to looking to you for his fun, he's more likely to look to you for help with something he isn't too sure about (unknown mailman, greeting a child, behaving nicely at a picnic) rather than just making his own mind up and depending purely on his own judgment. This is obviously a useful quality in the wild dog world, but less valuable in a domestic pet who's living with people.

A few points: Start and finish every session—whether trick training or playing a new game—practicing something you know your dog enjoys, so that even if he hasn't been successful in mastering something new, you're beginning and ending on a positive note. And be patient—some dogs are much quicker to pick up things than others. One pup may take six or eight sessions to master something that another may take weeks or even months to learn. However, even if you're not the owner of a canine Einstein, almost all dogs can learn a few simple tricks, provided that they're taught calmly and positively and are given plenty of time to absorb new things. Never push your dog beyond his frustration point. If he's getting fed up, you've been going on too long—make sure that you keep your play sessions fun for both of you.



Keep it Safe

The tricks and games that follow include some options for every kind of dog: small, large, young, or old. Even if your beloved pet is elderly or hasn't spent much time playing with you and learning new things, there'll still be some simple ideas you'll find that you can teach her. Do pay attention to the boxes on the pages—they offer safety advice when it's necessary and include some alternative suggestions for different elements for a game or trick to make it suitable for small or large breeds.

Pay attention to your dog when you're teaching active tricks. Usually, if a dog finds it physically uncomfortable to do a trick, she'll refuse to try it, so if she's normally eager to earn rewards and attention but is failing to engage with a particular game, it may not be the right trick for her. Never assume that your pet is being obstinate if she doesn't appear to want to do something, and never coerce her physically; not only is this ineffective, it may have the very undesirable side effect of making her scared of you or even of playing in general.



Jumping, in particular, should be taught carefully. Puppies shouldn't strain their joints while they are still growing, and elderly dogs who have back problems or who are stiff in the hips shouldn't jump or try any game that involves "crawling" on their bellies. Stick to some of the more mentally stimulating options if you have a dog who isn't very strong or agile physically.

And one last warning: Work with objects that are safe for your dog to play with. Toys manufactured specifically for dogs are the best options for hunt- or bring-the-object games. If you have a very "mouthy" dog who is strongly focused on mouthing and chewing any object that comes into her path, teach any collecting games with suitable props—nothing too small or that can be too easily chewed to pieces.

Once you have taken the safety advice into consideration, you can stop worrying and play wholeheartedly. You'll be rewarded with an enthusiastic pet who is thoroughly enjoying her dedicated time with you.



Working With Your Dog

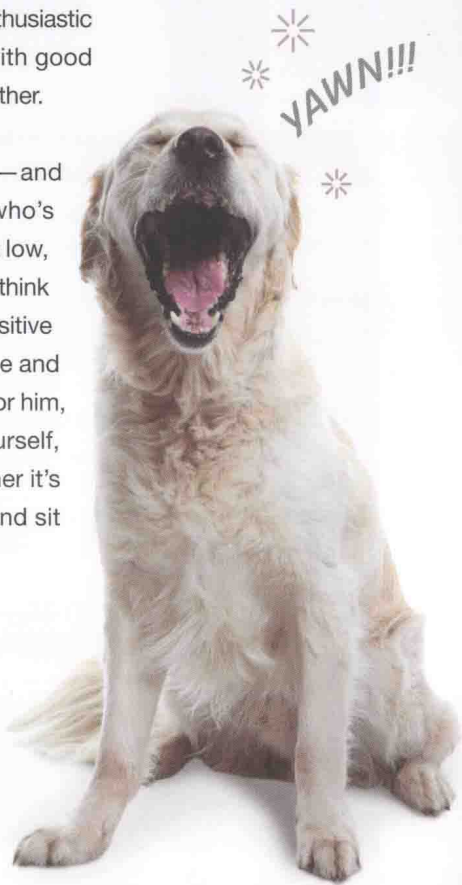
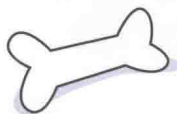
If you've never made a habit of dedicated play-and-training sessions with your dog, it's worth thinking about his individual qualities before you begin—working with his strengths will get you the best results in whatever it is that you're teaching him.

What does he like to do? Does he love running and jumping best? If so, maybe you should start with something that is agility based. Is he the thoughtful type? He may thrive on some of the tougher working-it-out choices. What behavior do you want to encourage? It's surprising how many owners will teach their dog a game that involves jumping on the couch—and then complain when he jumps on the couch after the game is over. Be sure to play fair; only teach him things that you'll be happy for him to do when your play session is finished.



Think, too, about what your time together offers him. Almost every pet loves to spend time with his owner, but you should offer other payoffs, too. When he's starting to learn, if you find things going slowly, break a game or trick into plenty of steps and stages and reward even a tiny advance. Don't let the session go on for too long—five minutes at a time is plenty for a dog who's concentrating hard and trying to understand what it is that you want him to do. You don't want a turn to become boring; your pet must be enthusiastic about engaging with you and associate you with good things if you want to achieve positive results together.

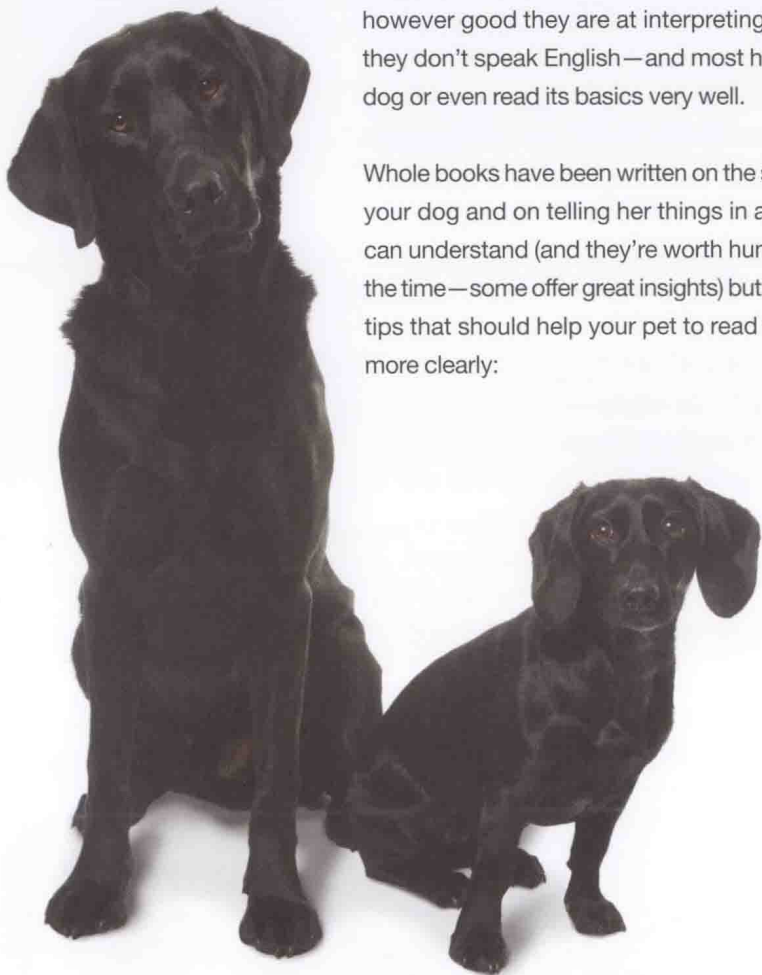
Get used to encouraging him with your voice—and always use either an upbeat tone (for a dog who's heading in the right direction with the trick) or a low, calm “Uh-uh” if he's getting it wrong and needs to think again. Make sure that you keep your voice as positive as your attitude—dogs are finely attuned to tone and some are particularly noise sensitive. Don't hector him, and if you find that you're feeling frustrated yourself, don't raise your voice. Instead, consider whether it's time for the pair of you to take a short break and sit down together with a snack!



Saying What You Mean

When trainers and behaviorists assess dogs alongside their owners, one of their most frequent findings is that owners aren't saying what they think they are—or at least, not as far as the dog's concerned! It's hard for humans to remember that, however many words dogs pick up and however good they are at interpreting human intentions, they don't speak English—and most humans don't speak dog or even read its basics very well.

Whole books have been written on the subject of “reading” your dog and on telling her things in a language that she can understand (and they're worth hunting out if you have the time—some offer great insights) but here are a few basic tips that should help your pet to read what you're saying more clearly:



- Watch your body language. Are you moving involuntarily when you offer a verbal cue? One error owners frequently make without realizing is to lean toward their pet when they're asking her to come to them. To a dog, this reads as a mixed signal—and if you're not careful, it could become one of many.
- Don't loom. You'll read this again in some of the following games, but it bears saying more than once. Give your dog her own body space; she doesn't like someone much bigger than her leaning over and encroaching into her body space any more than you would.
- Watch your tone. We've already mentioned keeping it upbeat, but remember, too, to match your voice to the instruction you're giving. Sl-o-o-w, long, low noises will calm things down; happy, upbeat sounds will speed things up.
- Only say it once. This is the hardest thing of all for a human to master. Give your dog the chance to learn what a verbal cue means. Don't repeat it in a lot of variations "Come, come to me, good girl, that's it, COME HERE" sounds like a complicated configuration to a dog. If "Come" doesn't bring her running, then at the least try to repeat only what you said before, without making it any more complicated than it was the first time.
- If you use visual signals and verbal cues, make sure they always complement one another—don't mix and match and assume your dog will understand.

