

Why Train With Toys?

By Linda Martuch and Brenna Fender

Training with toys has become popular in most dog training circles lately. If you've used food successfully in your training program, you might wonder why you should move outside your comfort zone and start using a new type of reinforcement. Why should you train with toys?

Toys provide many advantages that treats do not. By using toys, trainers can turn practice sessions into fun and games. Linking work and play can create stronger drive, increased confidence, reduced stress, and a happier dog. Dogs that think of their obedience or agility performance as play are more likely to find the work reinforcing, even when the toy is not present.

Increased drive and decreased stress can lead to speedier performances. Dogs that are "thinkers" may get caught up in the game and allow themselves to react without over-analyzing their job. At any point during a training session, a handler who uses toys can stop training and start playing, which can defuse stress brought about by confusion or complex exercises. Learning can be difficult; a sudden game of fetch or tug can provide relief and an improved attitude. Toys also help the trainers to de-stress. It's not only the dogs that need to understand that training is play - sometimes the trainers need the reminder more than the dogs.

Playing with a variety of toys can help a dog have fun even when there are no actual toys available. For dogs that are accustomed to playing, a stick, an empty water bottle, a leaf, and even the handler herself can be part of a rousing game. This is ideal for times in which you cannot actually have toys or treats with you, like at the start line of an agility course or in between exercises in the obedience ring.

Toys can be easily used as targets when training the dog to work away from you. Placing toys where you want the dog to go (like on the table or to the ring gates) can help him understand what to do. Toys can also be used to help handlers reward dogs for working at a distance. Rewarding with treats often requires the dog to return to you or you to run to the dog. Both of these actions reinforce the idea that rewards occur in only in the handler's immediate presence. By using an easy-to-throw toy like a Frisbee or a ball, the dog can be rewarded at a distance.



Training with toys can help avoid some of the pitfalls of food-only training. Some dogs become so focused on the food that they are unable to pay attention to what they should be learning. A training session can be sidelined by a dog obsessed with finding a dropped treat, hunting for treats dropped by others, and picking up odd items that might be food. And while you may use all your treats during a training session, toys never “run out.” Sometimes dogs acclimate to their training treats, and you have to hunt for a new ‘taste’ to keep the dogs drive up. Toys seldom lose their appeal; in fact they’re more likely to become more valuable over time.

Trainers who use a lot of treats may have to reduce the size of the dog’s meals to keep him from getting fat. Excess weight is detrimental for performance dogs that need to be fit to do their best and to avoid injury. Cutting back on the dog’s well-balanced regular diet and adding high calorie treats that lack adequate nutrition can raise other health concerns as well. Also, since treats are consumables, they have to constantly be replenished; a good quality toy can last for an extended period of time.

There are so many toys available now that there is bound to be something for every dog. Even very food motivated dogs can enjoy Tug-N-Treats and other toys with hidden pouches for tasty rewards. While training only with treats can be effective in some situations, any trainer that doesn’t use toys as an important part of their training program is missing out on a useful tool.

