

# behavior modification protocols

One of a series of ASPCA® Behavior Modification Protocols developed by Emily Weiss, Ph.D., CAAB



## over-arousal

The goal is to teach self control to easily over-aroused dogs.

## tug-and-drop training

### The rules for tug-and-drop:

- 1. The dog sits (or lies down) and waits for you to invite him to play (“Take it” or “Get it”) before ever putting his mouth on the toy;**
- 2. The dog releases the toy to you whenever you request (“Drop” or “Give”);**
- 3. The dog takes care not to put his mouth on human skin while playing tug.**

### program instructions:

Most dogs will play tug with any type of toy, but tug is most pleasurable for the human when they are comfortable with the toy. Obtain a fleece or soft rope toy 1-2 feet long. Handles are useful although dogs often enjoy playing with the handles so much that they are inclined to grab the handle, whether there is a human hand attached there or not. A tug toy with a bungee type handle puts less stress on both the dog and the human.

- 1.** Grasp the toy with one hand at each end. Ask the dog to sit. When he does, say “Yes, get it!” and wave the toy in front of the dog’s face or drag it along the ground in front of him, so that he is likely to grab the toy in the middle, thereby avoiding your hands. When he grasps it, verbally encourage him to play while you move the toy back and forth, up and down, to stimulate him to tug. Do this for 10-20 seconds.
- 2.** The next step is to teach the dog to release the toy on cue. Different approaches work for different dogs. You should not shout or intimidate the dog in order to get him to release the toy. Say “Give” or “Drop” in a conversational voice. Avoid repeating the cue over and over; say it once and then take action to prompt the dog to release. Here are a few suggestions:
  - a.** Say “Give” and instantly stop tugging the toy (let your arm go limp), but keep hold of it with one hand. Say “Sit.” If the dog releases the toy and sits, immediately say “Yes, get it!” and entice the dog to play again. With sufficient repetitions, the dog should learn to let go of the toy as soon as he hears you say “give,” so you don’t have to take hold of his collar. Eventually,
  - b.** Say “Give” and instantly stop tugging the toy (let your arm go limp), but keep hold of it with one hand. With the other hand, reach over the dog’s head to cover his eyes. Some dogs will release the toy as soon as you do this. If the dog releases the toy, immediately say “Yes, get it!” and entice the dog to play again. With sufficient repetitions, the dog should learn to let go of the toy as soon as he hears you say “give,” so you don’t have to cover his eyes. Eventually, vary how long the dog must wait before you invite him to play again. Sometimes ask him to sit before inviting him to play.
  - c.** Say “Give” and instantly stop tugging the toy (let your arm go limp), but keep hold of it with one hand. With the other hand, reach and grasp the dog by his collar. Pull him forward toward you and hold him stationary. This has the effect of making any tugging he does ineffective. Wait. Most dogs will drop the toy after a few seconds. Immediately say “Yes!” release his collar, say “Get it,” and invite the dog to play again. With sufficient repetitions, the dog should learn to let go of the toy as soon as he hears you say “give,” so you don’t have to take hold of his collar. Eventually,

sometimes ask the dog to sit, after the dog releases the toy, before inviting him to play again.

- d. Say “Give” and instantly stop tugging the toy (let your arm go limp), but keep hold of it with one hand. With the other hand, place a treat right in front of the dog’s nose so that he can’t help but smell it. Most dogs will instantly release the toy to grab the treat. Say “Yes,” give him the treat, and ask him to sit. When he does, say, “Get it,” and invite the dog to play again. With sufficient repetitions, the dog should learn to let go of the toy as soon as he hears you say “give,” so you don’t have to use the treat. You will still want to reward him with a treat when he releases the toy until the release behavior is fully learned. Sometimes ask the dog to sit after the dog releases the toy, before inviting him to play again. This method is undesirable if the dog is reluctant to play again after receiving the treat. Some dogs are so motivated by food that they are uninterested in play after eating a treat and so it is hard to accomplish the tug training.
3. Repeat the sequence of tugging for 10-20 seconds, then asking for a release, at least 10 times in succession. Realize that for procedures “a-c,” the reward for the dog releasing the toy is to get you to play again. This means that, while the dog is learning to play tug, you should instantly say “yes!” when he releases and invite play again. Don’t waste time praising or patting him. When a dog is into playing tug, they usually don’t care about praise or patting — they want to play more! For procedure “d,” the dog has two incentives for releasing the toy: to get the food reward and to get you to play again. So it’s still important to get the game going again quickly. Only when the dog promptly and willingly drops the toy as soon as you ask, should you ask him to sit and wait for any amount of time between bouts of tugging.
  4. If, at any time, the dog jumps forward to grab at the toy when you have not invited him, say “Uh-uh!” and instantly pull the toy behind your back or over your shoulder where it is inaccessible. If the dog already has the toy in his mouth, do what works (from above options) to get him to release it again but don’t reward him when he lets go. Next time, be ready so that when he jumps forward to grab it, you can snatch it away. Ask him to sit and wait before presenting the toy and inviting him to “get it.” You must teach him that he never gets the toy when he jumps for it before you ask. If you are consistent with this, he will learn that the best way to get you to play tug is to sit and wait patiently until you start the game.
  5. If, at any time, the dog misses the toy and puts his mouth on your hand, instantly shriek loudly, drop the

toy, and march out of the room (time out). If there is a door, slam it in the dog’s face. Wait a few seconds (no more than 20-30 seconds), then return and act like nothing happened. Invite him to play again, but use a warning voice to remind him to be careful. If the dog bites your hand more than a few times (3-4) in one play session, despite implementing time-outs, your dog may not be able to learn to play tug appropriately. Certainly if he keeps doing this, despite continued corrections, it’s not safe to play tug with him. If you’re really committed to teaching this game, use I-o-o-n-g tug toys so there’s plenty of room for his mouth and your hands.

6. When you’re ready to end the game, follow the same steps to get the dog to release the toy on request, but this time, ask him to sit and offer him a treat. While he’s eating the treat, put the tug toy away. He should not have access to the tug toy except when you are playing with him.
7. If the dog starts playing but then escalates to the point where he’s no longer playing but instead is aggressively guarding the toy, immediately cease playing tug with him. The way to determine if your dog has switched from play to aggression is to watch for signs such as a stiff body, stiff tail, “hard” eye contact and snarling (lifting/wrinkling lips while growling). If the dog is becoming aggressive, simply drop the toy and walk away.

**when the dog is adopted:** Review the “Tug-and-Drop Training” instructions with the adopter which can be found in the Reproducible Forms and Templates section. Remember to follow up with the adopter at three days, three weeks and three months post-adoption.

## tug-and-drop training

**ASPCA**<sup>®</sup>

**these are the three basic parameters for playing tug-and-drop:**

**program instructions:**

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2. The dog releases the toy to you whenever you request (“Drop” or “Give”).
3. The dog takes care not to put his mouth on human skin while playing tug.

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entice the dog to play again. With sufficient repetitions, the dog should learn to let go of the toy and sit as soon as he hears you say “give.” Eventually, you vary how long the dog must sit before you invite him to play again.

1. Grasp the toy with one hand at each end. Ask the dog to sit. When he does, say “Yes, get it!” and wave the toy in front of the dog’s face or drag it along the ground in front of him, so that he is likely to grab the toy in the middle, thereby avoiding your hands. When he grasps it, verbally encourage him to play while you move the toy back and forth, up and down, to stimulate him to tug. Do this for 10-20 seconds.

2. The next step is to teach the dog to release the toy on cue. Different approaches work for different dogs. You should not shout or intimidate the dog in order to get him to release the toy. Say “Give” or “Drop” in a conversational voice. Avoid repeating the cue over and over; say it once and then take action to prompt the dog to release. Here are a few suggestions:

a. Say “Give” and instantly stop tugging the toy (let your arm go limp), but keep hold of it with one hand. Say “Sit.” If the dog releases the toy and sits, immediately say “Yes, get it!” and

b. Say “Give” and instantly stop tugging the toy (let your arm go limp), but keep hold of it with one hand. With the other hand, reach and grasp the dog by his collar. Pull him forward toward you and hold him stationary. This has the effect of making any tugging the dog does ineffective. Wait. Most dogs will drop the toy after a few seconds. Immediately say “Yes!” release his collar, say “Get it,” and invite the dog to play again. With sufficient repetitions, the dog should learn to let go of the toy as soon as he hears you say “give,” so you don’t have to take hold of his collar. Eventually,

