



CDT'S GUIDE TO *Play-Based Training*

What is it, and how can it be the best thing you do with your dog?



WELCOME TO MY GUIDE.



Play is one of the most underrated parts of dog training.

A lot of people think of play as something separate from training, or something we only use to burn off energy. In reality, good play can become one of the most powerful tools we have. It builds trust, improves your relationship, gives your dog a healthy outlet, and creates the foundational communication skills that make everything else easier.

This guide is not about turning play into a strict obedience exercise. It is about helping you understand the importance of play with clarity, so your dog can have fun while also learning how to listen, switch on, switch off, and work with you.

I hope you enjoy!

Ryan - CDT Head Trainer

WHY SHOULD WE PLAY WITH OUR DOGS?

Play builds relationships.

When you play properly with your dog, you become more than just the person who feeds them, walks them and tells them what to do. You become someone they actively want to engage with, and a dog who enjoys interacting with you is much easier to train than a dog who sees the rest of the world as more exciting than you.

Play also builds trust. Your dog learns that you are safe, predictable and fun. They learn that they can get excited with you, move with you, have fun with you, bite a toy with you, chase, tug, win, let go, restart and come back for more.

For many dogs, play is also where we build the first pieces of real communication. They learn when something is available, when it is not available, when to grab, when to release, when to chase, when to pause and when the game is finished. These are not just “play skills.” They are training and life skills.

A dog who can play well can often learn better recall, better engagement, better impulse control, better arousal regulation and better focus around distractions. Not because play magically fixes everything, but because play teaches the dog that working with you is valuable.



THE PURPOSE OF PLAY.

Fun → Relationship → Training → Fulfilment

The purpose of real play is to have fun - if you're not having fun when you're playing then you're doing it wrong.

Play can be incredibly useful. We can use it to build confidence, improve recall, reward engagement, strengthen obedience, develop impulse control and give dogs an outlet for natural behaviour. But the function comes second. **Fun comes first.** If neither you nor your dog are having fun, you need to change the rules.

That might mean using a different toy, changing how you move, making the game shorter, lowering the intensity, letting your dog win more, playing in a quieter space, or choosing a game that suits your dog better.

Good play should feel like a conversation, not a battle. It should not just be the human trying to control the dog, and it should not be the dog dragging the human around with no rules at all. The sweet spot is somewhere in the middle: enough freedom that it feels exciting, and enough structure that both of you understand the game.

Real play should make your dog feel fulfilled. Different dogs enjoy different things. Some love tug. Some love chasing. Some love wrestling. Some love searching. Some love possessing things. Some need time to learn how to play at all.

The goal is not to force every dog into what we *think* play should look like. The goal is to find what brings your dog alive, then build enough structure around it that the game becomes useful without losing the joy.



CUES I USE IN PLAY (AND WHY YOU SHOULD TOO).



“READY”

This opens the play window. It tells your dog that play is about to start and something fun is becoming available. Over time, this helps your dog understand that play begins through you, rather than through demanding.

“GET IT”

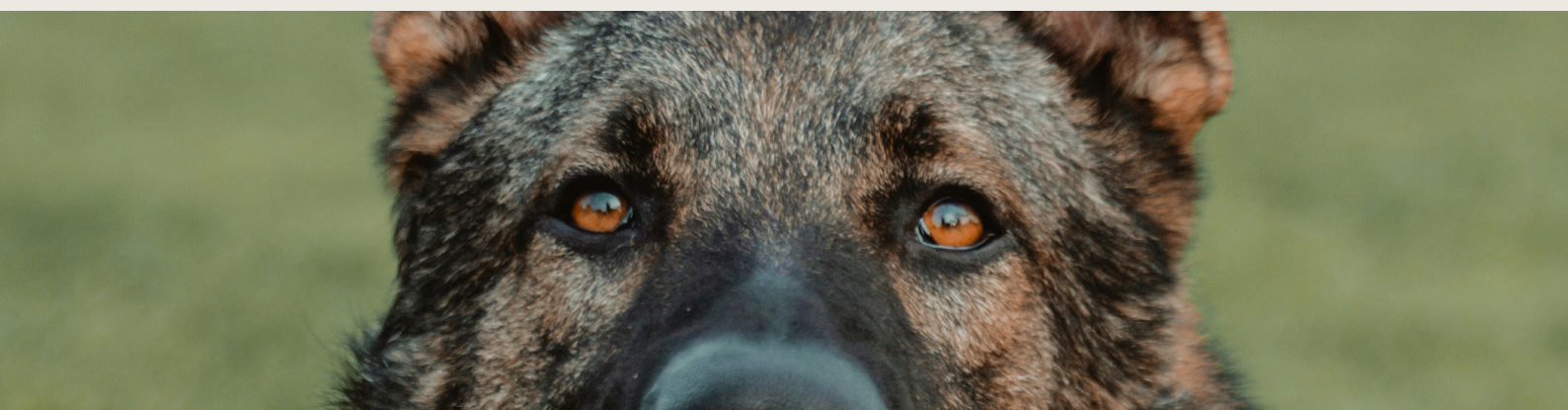
This means your dog is allowed to chase and grab a toy that has been thrown away from you. This is useful because it gives a clear difference between biting a toy in your hand and chasing a toy that has been sent away.

“EASY”

This means bring the intensity down. This can be useful if your dog is starting to lose their head a little. “Easy” is not a punishment. It tells the dog that the game is still available, but they need to bring themselves back into a more thoughtful state to keep playing.

“OUT”

This means release the toy. “Out” should be taught without conflict. We do not want to get into a battle over possession. Instead, we want the dog to learn that releasing the toy is just part of the game. The important thing is that “out” does not mean the fun is over.



CUES I USE IN PLAY (AND WHY YOU SHOULD TOO).



“YES”

This is the reward marker. In play, “yes” tells your dog they can grab the toy in your hand and initiate play.

Later on we can use this in our training, “Yes” being a really clear reward marker when our dog get something right and the reward being play.

Using a reward marker is a foundational concept that I teach all of my clients, whether 1:1 or sports.

“ENOUGH”

This closes the play window. Once you say “enough,” the game is finished and the toy is no longer available.

This cue matters because dogs need to understand that play has an ending. If your dog learns that barking, jumping, mouthing, grabbing or pestering restarts the game after “enough,” those behaviours will get stronger. Instead, once the game is over, calmly remove the toy and help your dog transition into a calmer behaviour, such as sniffing, resting, chewing or settling.



WHAT CAN YOU TRAIN WITH PLAY?

Recall

Engagement

Confidence

**Impulse
Control**

**Lead
Walking**

Obedience

And so much more.



“BUT MY DOG DOESN'T PLAY WITH TOYS.”

Play does not have to mean toys.

A lot of people think their dog “doesn’t play” because they are not interested in tug, balls or wrestling. In reality, plenty of dogs will play quite happily if we change what the game looks like. For some dogs, especially dogs who are lower in toy drive, less confident, easily distracted, or still learning how to interact with us, food is the easiest way into play.

Food can still create movement, chase, anticipation, engagement and fun. It just gives us a lower-pressure starting point. One of the simplest games we can use is the treat chase game. The idea is very straightforward: instead of just handing food to your dog’s mouth, you make the food move.

Start with your dog close to you. Show them a piece of food in your hand and move your hand, slowly at first, to encourage them to follow and chase it. Once they “catch” the food, have another piece ready and go again. With practice we can throw the treat away from us before bringing them back to chase again. We can also introduce challenges, such as asking the dogs to chase the food over, under or through obstacles.

This is useful because it turns food into an active reward. The dog is not just eating, they are chasing, moving, returning and re-engaging with you. For dogs who are not naturally toy-motivated, this can be a brilliant way to start building the same foundations we want from toy play.



As with toy play, the purpose still needs to be fun first. If your dog enjoys chasing food, searching for it, catching it, sniffing it out or running back to you for the next piece, that all counts. It does not need to look flashy, we just don’t want it to be transactional. The aim, as with all play, is to create a moment where you and your dog are enjoying something together.

MY FINAL THOUGHTS.



Play should be fun first and useful second.

The aim is not to control every second of the game or turn play into a chore. The aim is to create a shared language where your dog understands when play starts, how to access it, how to stay in the game, how to share, how to regulate their intensity and how to finish.

When play is clear, it becomes more than just burning off energy. It becomes communication, fulfilment, and most importantly, relationship.

And once your dog truly loves playing with you, you have something incredibly powerful to build the rest of your training around.



Want to unlock the secrets of playing with your dog?
You know where to find me. Book a free Discovery
Call and let's chat.

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