

Playing Fetch!

Retrieve games have long been a favourite pastime among dog owners, it provides dogs with an exercise outlet and is enjoyed by many a dog and owner.

Retrieving however doesn't always come naturally to all dogs and often the dog doesn't always connect the dots that if they return the ball, the game can start again. "He loves fetch he just doesn't like to bring the ball back"- this is often the case when the value and emphasis is focused on the chase part of the game and there is no perceived value for returning the toy.

Teaching the Retrieve

The easiest way to start retrieve training is to begin at the end. I know this might sound strange, but one option for teaching the retrieve is using a training method known as 'back chaining'. Basically, you are going to teach the dog the last behaviour first. In the case of retrieve, that means you are first going to teach the dog to drop the toy into your hand. Quite often too much time is spent focusing on the dog going and retrieving the toy, however if you place enough value in having the dog put the toy in your hand, then the distance of how far you throw is irrelevant as the dog can enjoy retrieving the toy with their new learned goal being to get the toy into the hand.



Step 1: Place a Toy in Your Hand

Start with a toy your dog LOVES and is sure to pick it up repeatedly. If your dog isn't very interested in the toy go back a few steps and try to pique their interest, if it's a ball bounce and catch it, if it's a tug toy animate it and use an excited and encouraging tone to enthuse the dog. Praise everything from looking at the toy to nosing or mouthing at the toy till they confidently want to take it into their mouth

If you have a dog who has already learned to get the ball and run off with it, then start each training session in a smaller environment that is not associated with running and chasing, like a bedroom, lounge room etc. to ensure the success of each training session. You can sit in a chair or on the floor with your dog, so you are close enough to get your hand under their chin. Once you have animated the toy with some vigorous movement place it on the ground, as soon as the dog takes the toy, quickly place a hand underneath their mouth while you place a treat by their nose with your other hand so they release the toy.

When they release the toy into your hand, praise them and give the treat.

Continue to practice this step until your dog is picking up the toy and dropping it when you place your hand underneath their jaw, slowly fading the treat lure until your hand is the only cue for them to drop the toy into your hand, but continue to reward them with the treat once they relinquish the toy so that they know they are still winning in this new game.

Step 2: Distance

Once your dog is placing the toy in your hand without the treat lure, start putting the toy gradually further and further away from you so he has to put more effort into the behaviour of bringing it to you. Do this slowly to ensure they really gain an understanding of what is expected. Depending on your dog, there are two ways to do this. You can place the toy where you want, or you can toss it. If you have a dog that once thrown it's "game on" and he thinks it's more fun to play keep away with the toy, start by placing the toy out further from your position, so the "game" is not initiated before the dog has successfully learned that it also fun to bring it back. Other dogs will need you to throw the toy to entice them to go after it.

If at any time your dog fails more than three times at bringing it back to you, you may have moved the toy too far away too quickly and need to put the toy closer. Add the cues to 'get it' as your dog is fetching the toy and as they place it in your hand reliably, start to introduce the cue 'give' you can use your own cues of choice.

Remember to always inspect your dog's toys regularly to check for wear and tear to ensure continued safe play. When you are finished with your retrieve games be sure to store play toys away in a toybox until you next play the game. Leaving them unattended with a dog who is in a heightened state after play could see those toys being treated like chewing/gnawing toys, not all toys are fit for this purpose.

These are the first steps to a great and reliable retrieve. Be patient and above all, keep the game fun!



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