

## Why is Play Important in Dog Agility Training?

A commonly heard comment in agility class: “My dog likes food and doesn’t really play with toys. He’ll work for food, so why should I spend time and effort getting him to also play with me and/or play with toys?”

There are many benefits to play in the context of agility training. For maximum training benefit, your dog should be willing to work for either toys or food. Food is often a ‘calming’ reward, good for the stationary work and thoughtful activities. Dogs will work for food and even get a bit excited over food, but food doesn’t engage the dog’s drive in the same way as play does.

Think of your dog’s wild ancestors. The hunt (prey drive) is where all the energy, speed, and power are needed to catch and bring down the prey. Play is like the hunt – it ramps up your dog’s body for intense activity and the dog is genetically programmed to find the hunt intensely satisfying. Food is what the dog gets when the hunt is over, so the act of eating is sign to the dog’s system that the ‘hunt’ is over and less energy is needed.

So you may ask, why do I want my dog ‘excited’? Maybe this first night of class with all the chaos of strange dogs and distractions, you’re thinking a little less excitement is a good thing! And obviously we don’t want your dog excited and ‘ramped up’ for the entire class. But there are many powerful benefits to being able to use play in class.

- Toys and play condition an attitude of eagerness and enjoyment in connection with agility. The intense enjoyment the dog feels as a result of play will transfer over to agility so that the dog will see agility as a reward in itself and isn’t just going through the motions to get a reward. This will make it easier later to still get a good performance when you’re in a trial and can’t use toys or food during the run.
- Dogs who play with their handlers form a stronger bond with the handler. Handler interaction becomes a trigger for a happy and eager emotional response.
- The adrenaline that play brings out in the dog helps to counteract stress. Dogs that are fully engaged in ‘killing’ a toy are less likely to be worried about the other dogs, strange noises, and other commotion going on around them.
- The prey drive that playing brings out in the dog ‘ramps up’ the dog’s system so that he uses more speed and power in whatever activity he’s doing. Anticipation of play to come or adrenaline from play just completed will both improve your dog’s physical performance and create faster and more intense behaviors to reward. You can’t reward what you can’t create.
- Play conditions the dog to work in a high state of arousal. A dog who learns everything in a calm state of mind will often lose those behaviors when presented with the excitement of running a sequence or the excitement of an actual trial. By training with your dog in the same aroused state of mind he’ll experience at a trial, the dog will more readily be able to perform the trained behaviors in a trial environment.

A common form of play used in agility is tugging. This has the benefits of using only a small space and keeps the dog attached to the handler. You can also play by teasing the dog with a toy to pounce on. And ideally you should be able to play with your dog without toys – get down on your dog’s level, play bow, grab at his feet, or shove on his sides. Observe how your dog plays with other dogs and mimic those motions with your dog. Refer to links on the WAG Level 1 Week 1 page for additional information on getting your dog to play.