

LET'S PLAY!

A Fail Safe Plan to Teach Your Dog to Love Toys

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Have you ever noticed how often the great agility training techniques start off with "Get your dog's favorite toy . . ." ? If your dog is not toy-motivated, this tends to get rather discouraging after a bit. There's a lot to be gained by using toys in agility. Playing a rousing game of tug, then sending your dog over a jump, and rewarding with another game of tug really builds a sense of agility as a fun game for both of you. In addition, being able to toss a toy out ahead of a dog who loves his toy is a terrific asset because it teaches him to drive away from the handler. For a long time, as the owner of non-toy-motivated dogs, I felt left out of the fun.

Two of my dogs were, for the most part, non-toy-motivated. There are a lot of great articles written about how to motivate a non-toy-motivated dog. One of my favorites is Susan Garrett's article on creating a motivating toy (<http://www.clickerdogs.com/createamotivatingtoy.htm>). These techniques certainly work for some dogs.

The problem is, if you have dogs like either of mine, wiggling, enticing, keeping the toy special, playing with it myself, making a big fuss out of it, keeping it in a special drawer, all of these activities turn him off. I used to pull the special toy out of the special drawer and start to make a big fuss and Brady (Beardie) would bark once at me and leave the room! BJ, my Havanese, was similarly unimpressed with my playing with something I pulled out of a drawer.

I tried many suggestions. Friends gave me many toys - "Here this one is irresistible to any dog". I still have a huge backlog of toys from all the donations of surefire toys. I would try, give up, then shelve the whole idea. I would then read a great article that required use of a toy, get re-inspired to try again and fail. One day I decided that I'm a clicker trainer, I can train for what I want. If what I want is to be able to toss a toy ahead of my dog and have him run to it with enthusiasm, then by golly, I can train that!

And so I did. I trained Brady to interact with a toy but it was clearly a *trained* behavior. Brady had no real interest in playing with the toys that she and I worked with. I could leave them lying around on the living room floor and she would never grab one up to play with it or bring it to me insisting we play. Yet if you see a video clip of our early training, it certainly looks like she's having a good time interacting with me and with the toy. I decided to try a new approach.

LOVE THAT GLOVE!

I had to start off by tricking myself. I found that, if I used anything at all that was like a toy, I couldn't help but start all the wiggling and enticing maneuvers - all the things that turned Brady off.

I chose instead to start with a "neutral" object, something that was not a toy. This is purely a psychological trick for the sake of the human and to keep play OUT of the picture until the proper time. You may not need this trick; I know I did.

My choice for a neutral object is a glove or a sock. I particularly like the object to be made of a "loosey goosey" type material. Dogs who don't like to pick up objects really need the most inviting type of object. A knitted cotton work glove is nice and soft and has some give to it when there's pull on it. The one-size-fits-all knitted winter gloves that are a dollar a pair are really great.

I teach the dog to run touch the glove with great enthusiasm. I do that by building a strong reinforcement history for what starts as a neutral object. Yes! You can teach your dog to target an object with complete passion even though he may not particularly be driven to *play* with it. I start this by teaching the dog to touch the glove when held in my hand just as I do with target training.

It's important that you NOT skip steps that I describe below. They are structured so that you will get many repetitions at a high rate of reinforcement (see sidebar).

Remember we're banking on the heavy reinforcement to generate the passion to run and touch this object that otherwise has no intrinsic value to your dog.

SIDEBAR: Rate of reinforcement is the number of click/treats in a given amount of time, say one minute. A rate of reinforcement of 20 click/treats in one minute is very likely enough to keep your dog in the game. A rate of 10 click/treats in one minute will lead to a dog who wonders off to sniff because he's not getting enough reinforcement quickly enough.

THE MANTRA: It's only a target. It's only a target.

The other little trick I played on myself was to keep in mind the mantra, "It's only a target, it's only a target, it's only a target." Again, this was to keep me from getting playful with the object too early. It's only a target. At first, all I want is for my dog to be THRILLED to see me get the glove out.

Training Step 1: Get the Behavior

Hold the glove in your hand, calmly and quietly, present it close to, but not touching, your dog's nose. Dogs can't help it; they are very curious. Your dog will touch the glove just to see what's up. Click/Treat for a nose touch to the glove. At the same time, move the glove away, put it behind your back. Once you have delivered the treat, put the glove back out and repeat this for a total of 10 times AS FAST AS YOU CAN. |

Always present (put the glove in the desired position) the glove in the same place. Don't wiggle it around, wave it around, make kissy noises or do anything to help your dog. Just let him volunteer to touch the glove in his own time. If you have a small dog, I find it's easier on your back if you sit in a chair to do this.

Always take the glove away after your dog touches it. If you leave it dangling around out where he

can reach it, he's likely to touch it when you are not ready to click. Too many of these and he could decide touching the glove is no longer being clicked and give up or try something else.

When he is successfully touching the glove quickly, do a test as described below to see if he meets the goal for this step. When he meets that goal, move on to the next step. If he does not meet the goal, repeat TRAINING STEP 1 until he does. If you do more than one session (of 10 reps) in a training period, be sure to put the glove out of the sight between sessions. Any time that glove is present should be a cue for him to touch it. If you need to stop and make notes or get more treats, the glove needs to be out of sight.

Goal: Your dog touches the target as soon as you put it in front of him.

Test: Your dog gets 10 C/Ts in 40 seconds. (C/T = Click/Treat).

By giving you a time goal to meet, it's very likely you will have to repeat this training step several times. *GOOD!* That's how we build a reinforcement history.

Training Step 2 : Change the Picture

This time you'll present the glove in a slightly different position. In Step 1, the glove was presented right in front of your dog's nose so he did not have to move very far to touch it. In this step, present the glove a few inches to your right so he has to take a step to touch it. Repeat TRAINING STEP 1 with the glove in this new position. Do all of your 10 reps with the glove at this location

Goal: Your dog touches the glove as soon as you present it.

Test: Your dog gets 10 C/Ts in 40 seconds.

If your dog has a lapse of memory in which he does not recognize the glove that just moments ago he couldn't keep from thumping with his nose, have heart! He'll get it. Any time you present the glove and your dog does not touch it within a respectable amount of time *for him*, say nothing, take the glove away, put it behind your back, pause for a second, then re-present it. The sight of the glove is a cue to do the touch behavior. Sometimes some dogs just need a bit of time to sort this out.

Training Step 3: Keep Changing the Picture

Continue working on various other positions to present the glove - a little higher, a little lower, a bit to the right, a bit to the left. At each new position, do ten reps at that position and check to see that you can pass the 10 in 40 seconds test.

Please spread your training sessions throughout the day! Keep them short and sweet. Ten quick reps, then do something else. By this time, I would estimate you have changed the picture several times and have a good 200 C/Ts for touching the glove. That's a nice deposit in the reinforcement bank! And you haven't asked for anything difficult yet either. No stress, no pressure, keep it light, easy and fun.

Training Step 4: Mix It Up

I know some of you have been chomping at the bit to mix up the position where you present the glove. I ask you not to at first so that you take the time to get in a couple hundred reinforcements with a predictable location. Now vary where you present it - each of your ten reps could be a different location!

Make all of your movements fast and snappy so that your dog will move quickly too. Present it quickly, click immediately for the touch, present food quickly, move the glove behind your back quickly and then present it again quickly. We want to see your dog **excited** to be doing this training! Continue to test for 10 in 40 seconds. If one set of 10 is slower than 40 seconds, just repeat it until you get it under 40 seconds. Build up the reinforcement bank!

Training Step 5: Going to the Ground

Begin to present the glove closer to the ground by about 3". Do ten reps with the glove presented to the same position. When you meet your test of 10 in 40 seconds, repeat with the glove presented 3" lower. Ten reps under 40 seconds, move it lower yet again. Continue to repeat this until you have the glove touching the ground.

How's the bank account now? For a short dog, you have probably added about 50 more reps to the account. For a tall dog, you may have added 100 or more. Good!! Don't be in a rush! What we are doing is Classical Conditioning - creating an association. The glove meant nothing to the dog at first. Now, after 200 or more reps, the glove is taking on a very positive association. In other words, the **PROCESS** is the important part rather than rushing towards a goal.

Any time you see hesitation or confusion, back up to the previous step, pass that test, then move on again.

Training Step 6: Taking It on the Road

Choose five other places you can practice **Love That Glove** in order of **INCREASING** distraction. The highest level need not be the ultimate in distraction training, just the highest level you are willing to work on given your dog's age and training history.

For my Beardie youngster, I would choose the back yard, the front yard, at Rally practice before anyone else arrives, at Rally practice with others there, and at the agility class I teach. When you move to a new place, always be prepared to start at least one step, if not more, prior to where you left off in your home base training area.

I cannot stress this enough: Taking It On the Road is the singular most important thing you can do for your dog in any training endeavor. Get it out on the road early and often, especially with a behavior such as playing with a toy (which is where we are headed). Dogs with little interest in toys can so easily lose whatever interest you get once out in public. Add this element **EARLY** in the

training - don't wait to have a finished behavior in the kitchen. At the risk of repeating myself: get it out on the road early and often.

Training 7: On the Ground

Time to work with the glove (which is still "just a target") on the ground. This can be a big change for some dogs. The difference between your holding the glove and the glove being flat on the ground seems trivial to us yet HUGE to our dogs.

Present the glove with one part of it touching the ground. Doing this while seated in a chair can help save your back. When you get 10 successful reps in 40 seconds or less, then let the glove be all the way on the ground with your hand hovering near it, let's say about 3 inches from it. Continue to take the glove away between reps.

Each time your dog passes the test, move your hand away from the glove by another 3". Work until you can stand all the way up straight with the glove on the ground in front of you and your dog touches it 10 times for click/treats in 40 seconds. At this point it becomes too cumbersome to remove the glove for each rep. Just be sure to move your dog away from the glove if you need to put your attention elsewhere for a moment.

REMINDER: It's important that you pick up the glove to indicate the end of the session. If you leave it there while you record the time or get more treats or make notes, your dog is likely to touch it and not get reinforced. With a really sharp dog this might tell him he ought to try something new to get clicked. Yikes! Not what we want. Any time you are not actively in a session, remove the glove from your dog's reach.

Training Step 8: Change the Picture

Let's make sure your dog doesn't attach any significance to your position. After all it's the glove that's important, right? How can you make your position unimportant? By changing it. Do short sessions with the glove on the ground with your body turned sideways to the left, turned sideways to the right, sitting on a chair, sitting on the ground, hey! How about lying on the floor? Can your dog still touch the glove on cue when you are lying on the floor? How about if you are lying on the floor with the glove on your belly?

Goal: Your dog touches the glove no matter what position you are in.

Test: Your dog gets 10 C/Ts in 40 seconds in each of several positions.

Let's check on what we have so far. Your dog can touch the glove with you in various orientations. Good job!!! Practice changing your orientation in three other places. How big is the bank account now? Probably 500 to 1000 reps of being reinforced for touching this glove. I'm betting your dog is CRAZY about this glove!

Training Step 9: Making It More Interestig

Up until now the glove has been on the ground right in front of you. It's time to add some distance to the picture. Start by moving the glove 6" farther away from you than it has been. As we build distance, I'm going to let you choose the number of reps you need to determine that your dog understands the task. Some dogs do fine with three reps at each new distance. Some seem to do fine with only three, and then things deteriorate. Keep a close eye on your dog's attitude and enthusiasm for the work.

Choose your own reps for these increments. Move to the next increment when you are successful at the current increment. I have listed these distances in a linear sense but really I want you to work on them in the yo-yo sense. Once you get to 3 feet, then use 3 feet as your average. Set up distances that are some times more than 3 feet and some times less than 3 feet - that way the distance is unpredictable and things are a bit more challenging. When you are ready to move to 3.5 feet, yo-yo around the average of 3.5 feet. And so on for each distance. We increase distance by one-half of a foot yet continue to yo-yo around that average distance.

Place glove 1 foot in front of you, 1.5 feet in front of you, 2 feet, 2.5 feet, 3 feet, 3.5 feet, 4 feet. Great! Let's take a moment to do a test at this point.

Goal: Your dog touches the glove when the glove is 4 feet away from you.

Test: Your dog gets 10 C/Ts in 45 seconds.

Training Step 10: Making it More Interesting

One way to make the game more interesting now is to do walk-about and drop the glove every few steps. To make your reps happen more quickly, you can buy several of the same glove and drop them as you walk. At each drop, your dog touches, you click/treat. After doing 8 or 10 of these, you can then pick up all the gloves at once (or get out your dog who *does* retrieve and have that dog pick them all up).

You can also begin tossing the glove starting with a two foot toss and gradually working up to greater distance. A glove does not toss very well because it's so light. Adding hot dog chunks to the fingers will give you some ballast. When you toss a "loaded" glove, be sure to run with your dog to the glove and release the hot dog from the glove for his treat.

Make a BIG production out of doing this. Fumble with it a lot all the while exclaiming "oh my gosh, there's a hot dog here. Oh it's stuck. Here comes the hot dog!" Just babble away very excitedly about the soon-to-be-released hot dog. This will add to the passion for this object.

Increase your distance gradually keeping your dog successful. Always click for his nose touch when he arrives at the glove. This is still a TARGET object. Before attempting to play with it as a toy, we want a big bank account and enthusiasm when running to it.

At this point you have successfully taught your dog to run touch a neutral object when it is tossed. Since you took the time to develop a good reinforcement history with the object, he should be running to it with great enthusiasm. What started out as a neutral object now has reinforcement value to your dog. Even if your dog is not toy-motivated, you can now use this object as a tossed

reinforcer when you want to reinforce for driving ahead of you.

TURNING IT INTO A TOY

Now it's finally time to make this object into a toy! I'll bet you thought we'd never get here. After hundreds of reps for touching the glove, your dog is quite convinced that you are going to click/treat him each time he touches it. Time to change the game.

We're going to introduce a bit of frustration and see if we can frustrate him into touching it with his teeth. Set up a training session with the glove and do ten quick reps of just having him touch it when it's on the ground in front of you. Click/Treat for each touch.

On the eleventh time he goes to touch it, do NOT click and do NOT treat! What we want to see is that he is so expectant of being clicked that he gets a tad feisty and puts teeth on the glove. Sue Ailsby speaks of the "Hey Stupid" response. Yep, we're looking for the "Hey, stupid! Didn't you see me touching here!" When you see teeth on object, click/treat for that.

If your dog returns to the glove and touches it with teeth again, GREAT! Click/Treat that. If he only nose-touches it, ignore it. Let him be frustrated about it so he'll put teeth on it again. Click/treat for teeth.

It won't take long before you are getting several open-mouth touches in a row. Once your dog is giving you open-mouth touches, stop clicking for those and hold out for a little tiny nip at the glove. Again, let your dog get a little frustrated (by that I mean the *good* kind of frustration) Don't rush this. Let your dog lead the way.

Any time you see him hesitating or being reluctant to go further, you probably went too fast. Just drop back and get a good series of ten nose touches all with C/Ts and then withhold the click for the eleventh and work on up from there. Work through open-mouth touch, a little nip, a little grab, a big grab, flapping it, really flapping it, trying to kill it. At each stage give a lot of C/Ts for current behavior, then withhold the click and see what happens.

Once you have your dog shaking it and trying to kill it, CELEBRATE!!! You now have your non-object-oriented dog grabbing and shaking something. WOOOO HOOOOOO!!!

Work several sessions of this until you see him eager to grab at the glove even jump up and try to grab it away from you. We LOVE THAT!!! Any of the behaviors most people do NOT want from their toy-obsessed dogs, those of us with non-toy-motivated dogs LOVE to have happen. Just picture the day when he puts his first hole in your T-shirt. I still remember how happy I was to see that. Don't worry about bad habits at this stage of training. Embrace them, love them, encourage them. Your dog's interest in an object is way too fragile to do anything to discourage him. Further down the road is the time to work on self-control issues. For these dogs we need to build "out of control" first before we can work on self-control.

TAKING IT ON THE ROAD AGAIN

Now it's more important than ever to repeat all of this process in many other places. Distractions add stress to these dogs. And stress causes them to be too concerned about the environment to be able to engage in play. Build up your dog's ability to play, even in this small way, in other places. Start off with low distractions and work up GRADUALLY to the biggies - especially other dogs. Non-toy-motivated dogs can easily lose everything you've gained so far in the presence of other dogs. It's just not all right with them to lose themselves in play and become unaware of who is around.

WHAT ABOUT THOSE FOOD-TOYS?

Although we have been using a glove for our training, some of you may be wondering about how you can use, what I call, a food-toy object. These have become a virtual cottage industry in agility. A food-toy object is one that has places to hide food - Viewtainer (plastic squeezey thing to hold screws and nuts), jackpot toy (fuzzy toy with velcro opening to stash food in), film canister with food inside, draw-string bait bag. There are a lot of things you can use as food-toy objects.

<http://www.peak.org/~helix/foodtoy.html> shows a selection of things I used with BJ. Now there is a wonderful new food-toy called the Tug-It - <http://www.tug-it.com> which looks like great fun.

Even when my dogs are doing well with the glove, I teach them to love the food-toys too because they are more substantial and they throw much better.

Some of you may be asking, why not just start with the food-toy object originally? What is the advantage of adding this now? There are two reasons. Many of the food-toy objects are not the soft type of object that I favor. (Tug N Treat, Viewtainer for example). I want students to use something like a sock or knitted glove that the dog can be shaped to take a little nip of once there's a reinforcement history. Also, remember that I also like to keep any element of the object being a toy out of the handler's mind. Maybe I'm the only one who would get suckered into trying to play too early and need this mental trick, but somehow I think not.

When introducing a food-toy object, start all over with TRAINING STEP 1. Don't be in a rush. Build the bank account for this object. You will probably find things go quicker with the second object; nevertheless I prefer to err on the side of caution and get lots of reps in the bank.

When using a food-toy object, be sure to make a BIG production out of releasing the food. That's part of the fun and excitement. Really get your dog's eyes sparkling as he dances around begging you to hurry up and get that food released!

LEARNING TO PLAY WITH YOU

Let's summarize what you've done so far.

Group I: You've created a huge reinforcement history for touching a "neutral" object (a soft and stretchy one such as a sock or glove). Your dog is running to it enthusiastically when you toss it.

You've put food in it for ballast so that you can toss it further. You've withheld the click and were able to shape your dog to nip, grab, bite, shake, try to kill your sock, glove or food-toy object.

Group II: You've created a huge reinforcement history for touching a "neutral" object (a soft and stretchy one such as a sock or glove). Your dog is running to it enthusiastically when you toss it but you are not able to get him to nip at it or grab it let alone shake or kill it. That's OK. If all you get is running to it enthusiastically, then use that as a tossed reinforcer. At this point you could build a reinforcement history with a food-toy object (Tug N Train, jackpot toy, Viewtainer) just as you did with the glove and use it as a thrown reinforcer/target. In other words, this is a useful training tool even if your dog isn't enamored of it as a toy.

If you're in Group I, once your dog has learned that it's not only OK with you that he grab an object and shake it but it's also rewarded, you can now pull out all those articles about creating motivating toys, wiggling, teasing and so on. Take the time to build some reinforcement history with a new object by starting back at TRAINING STEP 1. Get your dog convinced that you pay for every time he touches it; then begin to withhold click/treats and shape him to nip, grab, bite, shake, kill this new object.

When selecting the first toy that I hope to use for real tugging, I like to start with something long so that there is a good distance between my hand and the dog. This takes the pressure of "Is it really okay to try and take this from her?" off the dog. I like something soft and stretchy like polar fleece or fake sheepskin. I like it to be small in diameter so it's more wiggly when you move it. A stuffed toy with long wiggly narrow legs is good. BJ's first real toy was what we call "Sock-a-Monkey". These have four ropey legs and a fuzzy body and head and look like sock monkeys somewhat. I make up names for toys and I say them in sing-song excited voices. "Sock-a-monkey" said in my special voice would cause him to wiggle all over.

For tugging, start off as if your dog were a baby puppy. If you can put your hand on it when he has it in his mouth, click/let him have it right away. Many many many times. The bank account, remember? This is a really hard thing for non-toy-motivated dogs - knowing that it's okay for both of you to want the toy. Your job is to let him know it's okay. Click for your hand being on it, let him have it as the treat.

When that's going well, begin to move your free hand around. Pat the ground near him as you hold the tug toy with him. Patting the ground is a distraction but it's also a worry - are you coming to take the toy? Pat the ground, click for his hold, let him have it as the "treat".

Be sure to let him run off with it, carry it around, anything he wants with it. Give him a few minutes to just have it and chew on it (as long as it's safe). Remember we're not working on anything like "give" or self-control with these dogs. That comes WAY down the road.

When he can hold the toy with you while you pat the ground, escalate a little bit, by pulling him in closer with the toy. If he pulls back, click instantly and release the toy to him. Gradually build for a stronger pull by clicking each time you feel him pull on the toy.

When you have a strong pull consistently, begin to apply "pressure" to the situation by reaching to

touch his side. Stroke and pet his side while you both have the toy. Click/release for his allowing that. Gradually build up to a strong pull while you stroke him. To add more pressure go to a shorter length toy and drop any petting or stroking on his side at first.

I like to use lots of happy verbalizations while doing this tug training to make this a game we play together. Over time I will add in pushing on his chest by starting off very gently, then escalating to a real push. I will add in a cue "tuggie" when he pulls noticeably harder than he has been doing, click/release.

The elements of pressure are these: space between you and the dog, other stimuli in the environment, how much pull you use, how much and what kind of touching you do while tugging, how intense you get about tugging. Add each one of these individually by starting off at a whisper and moving slowly towards a roar. Work on one element of pressure at a time, drop all the others.

At this stage of the game, I suggest getting the tug game quite strong at home before attempting to take it on the road. It takes a lot for a formerly non-toy-motivated dog to be able to tug with other things going on around him. I have found that it's not that he's distracted TO the other things but that he's too concerned about environmental pressure or stress. Take it easy on this. Get a really great game going at home and then begin to phase into very low distraction settings in a very gradual way.

I know that you too will be celebrating your first rip in a T-shirt, your first grab out of your hand, your first hole in a Frisbee if you take the time to let your dog lead the way. Remember to build that bank account before even thinking about toys and playing. Once you do that, you'll be in great shape!

BIO

Helix Fairweather teaches clicker-trained agility classes, rally classes, Control Unleashed® classes (based on the book, Control Unleashed, by Leslie McDevitt) in Oregon, teaches on-line internet classes (<http://www.cyberagility.com>) for students all over the world, and gives seminars throughout the U.S. including GO FOR IT! *Relaxed and Ready* (see <http://www.cyberagility.com/seminars.html>). She has been a member of the Clicker Expo Faculty since the first year of its inception and is currently faculty for the Karen Pryor Academy for Animal Training and Behavior (<http://www.karenpryoracademy.com>).