

YOUR DOG'S TOYS

By Joann Locher

What is a "toy"? Anything your dog uses as a plaything. It can be a "regulation" dog toy purchased from a pet store (ball, squeaker, rawhide, tug), a household item (plastic bottle, dish, rope, stuffed animal), a personal possession (shoe, sock, hand, foot), or one of nature's creations (stick, rock, leaf).

Puppies quickly learn what is FUN! In a common scene in the average puppy-home, the owner sees that puppy has picked up one of his own toys and goes back to reading or watching television, ignoring puppy. Later, the puppy picks up a shoe and the owner immediately takes notice and takes chase, saying "Hey! Give me that!!" Lesson: Shoes are a lot more fun than boring dog toys!

A good approach for getting the puppy to enjoy his own toys is to always make a big fuss when he picks up his own toys. That's the time to say, "Hey! What have you got there?" pretending that the puppy has something very special which you'd like to have too. Then, if puppy picks up your shoe, ignore it. Go immediately to the toy box and have a fabulous time playing with the puppy's toys. The puppy will soon think, "Look at that great ball, and here I am stuck with this boring shoe!" He will drop the shoe to come join in the fun. Now the owner can quietly retrieve the shoe and put it out of reach (vowing to never leave it on the floor again, or spraying it with bitter chew deterrent.)

During this fun-filled "Keep Away Game", the owner should play along but sometimes (with the hand firmly on the toy) say "Give!" and firmly take the toy. Then reward puppy and either give the toy back or put it away. As behaviorist John Rogerson would say, "Control the games, control the dog!" Dogs use toys and games to express their dominance over others.

Letting a young puppy have access to only certain types of toys, while having all other objects either out of reach or sprayed with bitters, is an effective form of passive training. Toys "tell" the dog what types of things he can have. Giving certain types of toys can create a destructive chewing problem. For example, if you let the dog have a shoe, how is he to know that he cannot have your other shoes as well?

Most books on raising puppies advise that the puppy should have a limited number of toys (one to five).

This is so that he can discriminate what is his and what is not. However, the attention span of a puppy is so short, that he often needs a variety of playthings to keep him out of trouble. A good way to accomplish this is to have a toy box. A sturdy plastic dishpan is ideal. If the owner invests, or finds, a lot (ten to twenty) of appropriate puppy toys, then the puppy will have enough diversity to keep him busy. The toy box will take care of the discrimination problem: if the object is in the box, the puppy will know it is his. If it's not in there, it's "off-limits" (and, therefore, has been sprayed with bitters, or is out of reach, or is well-monitored so that a correction can be made if he touches it).

To increase the puppy's interest in a toy, "tease" him (bounce, shake, drag, squeak or toss it) for a while, until he acts like he simply can't live without it. Then toss it, so that he can pounce on it, as if it were prey. One can also smear a thin film of chocolate or bacon grease on very hard or indestructible rubber toys to initially make them more appealing.

The owner can be a toy for the puppy. There are many puppies who must view their owners as giant walking, talking "squeak toys"! Every time the puppy mouths or jumps at the owner, he responds by recoiling or making a quick, amusing sound, which intrigues puppy. This owner may even think that his behavior is aimed at correcting the mouthing or jumping. But remember: Corrections correct! They are not something you get to repeat an endless number of times, while the puppy continues to repeat the behavior.

So, let the puppy's response to your actions be the indicator. Are you correcting the puppy...or are you a plaything? Does the puppy use your hands and pant's legs as tug-toys? It's the movement which draws the puppy like a magnet. Try to limit your movement, while making the puppy's toys move around. If this redirection does not work, then correct the rude behavior in some manner which is effective and appropriate for your puppy's sensitivity level.

You should enjoy your puppy without losing his respect. In the wild, the leader of the pack controls all of the toys!