

How do I teach my dog to play fetch?

Some dogs are natural born fetch machines. But the vast majority of dogs run after thrown balls. They grab it, dash around and then play a game of catch-me-if-you-can. Eventually most drop the ball well out of reach only to grab it back when owners try to pick it up.

This is normal and has a name. It's called instinctive drift. The dog finds the ball so rewarding that it has difficulties giving it up. There is one way to get around this and it is called back chaining. In other words, if you want to teach your dog to fetch, you need to teach it backwards.

Just remember to keep exercise and games in perspective. Tired dogs do tend to sleep a lot. But too much exercise and neurotic ball chasing are not the signs of a relaxed animal. Balance games out by teaching your dog how to relax quietly on its own with a good safe chew bone.

If your dog struggles at any point, remember to return to an easier step. Your dog probably just needs a little more practice at an easier level.

Step 1 – The ball means treats

Put the ball in your pocket. Periodically bring it out of hiding and feed your dog a few small special treats.

Step 2 – Give up the ball

Give the dog the ball and then hold out some treats. If need be hold the treats near the dog's nose so it has a choice to make. It must spit out the ball in order to earn the food reward.

Step 3 – Give up the ball without any food as an upfront incentive

Give the dog the ball and hold your hand under the dog's chin. Wait to see if it spits the ball out. If you did sufficient repetitions of the previous step, it should spit the toy out quickly. When it does, take a food treat out of your pocket and reward it for giving up the ball. Some dogs will start refusing to take the ball altogether. If this happens, make sure you periodically reward your dog for taking the ball to offset your dog's enthusiasm.

Step 4 – Reward a ball in the hand

At first your dog was probably dropping the ball without thought. At first it is acceptable to reward all your dog's attempts. If you want your dog to drop the ball in your hand, only reward it with a treat when it does so. There is no need to correct the dog for wrong responses. The lack of a food reward for dropped balls is enough feedback.

Step 5 – Mini tosses

Toss or drop the ball just in front of you. (Approximately ½ meter) Hold your hand out so your dog has a place to put it. Stay quiet and let the dog puzzle it out. If you did enough repetitions of the previous step it should pick up the ball and spit it out. Reward your dog for dropping the ball near you.

Step 6 – Mini tosses with the ball in your hand

Increase your expectations and reward the dog only if it places the ball in your hand.

Step 7 – Medium tosses

Start tossing the ball a meter away. Always reward the dog when it brings the ball back and drops it into your hand. Gradually toss the ball a little bit further until it can reliably bring back a ball that is thrown in a boring fashion.

Step 8 – Start adding some speed

When your dog demonstrates it can reliably fetch, you can gradually start throwing the ball further and further. Always reward the dog for bringing the ball back to you and dropping it in your hand.

Step 9 – Add a command

A command isn't necessary, but if you like start saying, "fetch" as you toss the ball.

Step 10 – Eliminate the food reward

If your dog enjoys the game, the food rewards are easy to eliminate. Your dog will quickly learn that dropping the ball means you will throw it again. That is more than enough reward for a dog that enjoys playing fetch.

Additional Notes:

If your dog is possessive over toys and shows signs of lip curling, snapping, growling or tensing – seek professional assistance. They are not normal parts of a fun fetch game.