

Puppy Raising

Learning to play guidance

Version 1.2

Updated September 2024

Sections

There are 4 topics within this document. By following each link below you will be directed straight to that area of guidance.

1. Learning to play

2. Learning to swap items

3. Learning to play tug games and introducing the 'drop' cue

4. Introducing interactive food toys.



1. Learning to play

In this section

In this section, you'll learn to interact positively with your puppy and learn to play in a way where you both have fun, this will also include your puppy sharing their toys happily with you and feeling positive about you being close to their food. By the end of your puppy raising journey, we would ideally like your puppy to:

- Be able to play without mouthing.
- Be able to swap their toys for another toy or food when asked.

Remember it will take time for your puppy to develop their self-control when playing. However, if you're ever concerned about your puppy's behaviour, please contact your Puppy Development Adviser. We will cover mouthing in more detail during this section but please remember that mouthing is a normal part of puppy interaction and development whether, for example, exploring their environment or during physical changes such as teething.

Quick links

By following each link below, you will be directed to the area within this guidance to support that area of learning.



Why



Knowing your puppy



Managing for success



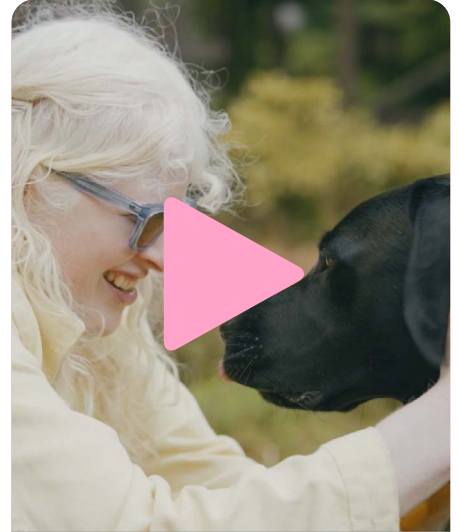
Teaching foundations



Why

Why is this important for a guide dog?

Successful guide dog partnerships are built on a very strong relationship between the dog and their partner. Playing and having fun together is an important part of building and sustaining that relationship, but puppies will sometimes have to be taught to play in an appropriate way and in a way that can then be transferred over to their partner who has a vision impairment.



[Video:](#) Guide dog owner playing with guide dog.



Knowing your puppy

Make sure to understand what toys and type of play your puppy enjoys. Different puppies find different types of play rewarding, such as tug or retrieve games as well as different types and textures of toys.



Managing for success

- Don't have high energy play sessions with your puppy for an hour before or after feeding. Please read about gastric bloat in the [Recall and off-lead guidance](#).
- Start off at home in a low distraction environment, one on one with your puppy.
- Have a few toy options available your puppy can choose from with you.
- If your puppy ends the game before you do that's ok.
- Save a few specific toys for interactive play sessions only.
- When using interactive toys, make sure there's plenty of space available for the play session you have planned, for example, a KONG ® wobbler should not be used near glass doors or windows.
- Make sure your puppy has water available during play time.



Teaching foundations

Below we provide a step-by-step guide to help build up your puppy's self-control through play, the exercises include:

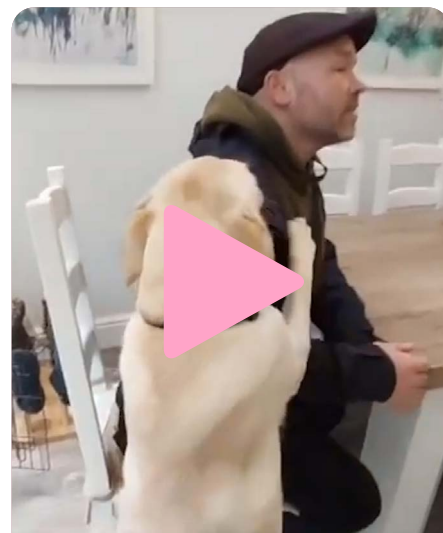
- Managing mouthing – from day 1.
- Learning to swap items – from day 1.
- Playing tug and learning to 'drop' – from around 12 weeks.
- Playing with interactive food toys – can be introduced in the first few weeks alongside food bowl manners.

These activities should only be carried out with your puppy by registered puppy raisers.

Managing mouthing

Please read the document [Mouthing handout](#)

- The first and most important thing to remember is that mouthing is a very normal part of a puppy's development.
- It begins in the nest, as a way of exploring their surroundings, litter mates and most importantly to find the teats to feed.
- It plays a vital role in how a puppy gets to know its surroundings and one another.
- However, we can redirect a puppy onto what they want to mouth and teach them what behaviour we want. Remember, this takes time, patience, and a lot of environmentally enriching toys, that your puppy enjoys.
- Before and during teething, from approximately 12-14 weeks of age, they will probably still really appreciate a frozen toy, wet towelling frozen or stuffed KONG ® /bone.
- If mouthing is persisting and none of the above is working, the chances are your puppy is too tired, so let your puppy rest.



[Video: Managing mouthing.](#)

2. Learning to swap items

In this section

In this section you'll teach your puppy to be comfortable with human hands being around their items; and to take, swap and give them back as appropriate.

Quick links

By following each link below, you will be directed to the area within this guidance to support that area of learning.



Knowing your puppy



Managing for success



Teaching foundations



Knowing your puppy

Before you can begin to teach your puppy to swap something they have for something you have, you need to ensure they are completely comfortable with you being close to them when they're eating, chewing, playing with a toy or similar.

They should have relaxed facial and body posture. Look out for any subtle signs of concern, such as lip licking, freezing, or turning their head or body away as you approach.

If your puppy shows any signs of lip curling, growling, or snapping, then slowly move away from your puppy, leaving them with whatever it is they have and discuss this with your Puppy Development Advisor as a priority. Only adults registered and trained with Guide Dogs should carry out these exercises.



Play is about having fun!



Managing for success

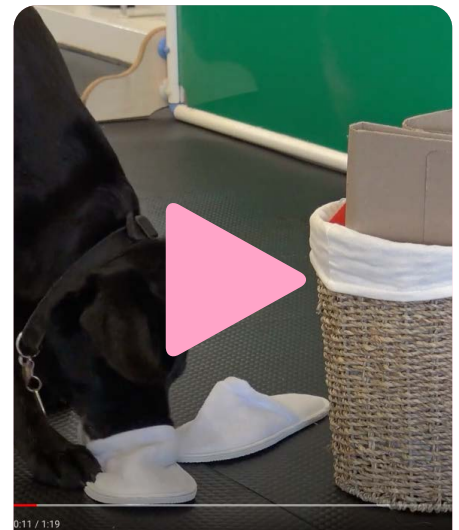
- Always start this when your puppy is engaged with something they are less interested in (for example, a less favoured toy).



Teaching foundations

Learning to swap items

- Approach your puppy calmly with a similar value toy and initiate play with the alternative toy. Have some fun! Leave your puppy with the new toy and pick up the first toy and move away.
- If your puppy doesn't engage with you or move away from the first toy, please contact us.



[Video: Puppy steals item](#)

3. Learning to play tug games and introducing the 'drop' cue

In this section

In this section you'll learn to teach your puppy to be pleased to see their tug toy, but to choose to be calm in anticipation of getting to play with the toy and to drop the toy when asked to.

Quick links

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Knowing your puppy



Managing for success



Teaching foundations



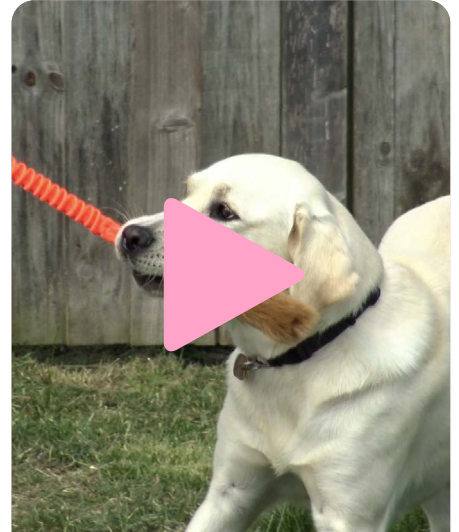
Knowing your puppy

Not all puppies will enjoy playing tug games whereas others will get very enthusiastic. The stages below should help you keep play at a safe and enjoyable level for you both.



Managing for success

- You'll need a soft tug toy, ideally one with a bungee section, that's long enough for your puppy to grab without you having to bend down further than is comfortable.
- Have plenty of food rewards readily available as well as another toy your puppy enjoys.



[Video:](#) Tug game.



Teaching foundations

Stage 1: Engaging with the toy

- Pick up your tug toy and stand in front of your puppy, holding it so that it's out of reach and not dangling.
- If your puppy continually jumps for the toy, hold it closer to your body and out of sight or consider swapping for a tug toy they're less excited by.
- When your puppy has four paws on the floor and are still, say 'Okay' and immediately lower the tug toy to the floor in front of them, and move it along the floor away from them.
- Let them grab and catch it, play for a short while, and then you release the toy. Give lots of praise.
- Once your puppy has had a chance to enjoy the tug toy for a short while, offer them several food rewards from your hand in exchange for the toy.
- Whilst your puppy is eating the food rewards, hold the tug toy well out of reach, wait for them to finish eating, and be still again, and start the game again (say 'Okay').

- Let your puppy lead the game. If they shake or tug go with them, encouraging a side-to-side movement, don't immediately tug back. Let them control the intensity and gradually learn to tug harder.
- Reinforce the harder tugs by letting go of the toy and celebrating their 'win.' Remember it's a game and who doesn't love winning!
- If they come back and offer the tug toy to you, pick it up and keep playing. If they want to enjoy it on their own for a while, let them, before approaching them and swapping it for a few food rewards or another toy, then starting to play again.
- A tip for getting them to return to you is to sit on the floor, with your back against a sofa or wall, and remain in this position, only engaging in play with them when they return to you, and never follow them. The reward for them coming back to play with you is a game of tug, but keep it very brief and let them win frequently.
- If they accidentally let go of the tug toy when you are tugging, claim your win. Let them see how pleased you are, how much you value the toy, and wait for them to be still before resuming the game, then immediately offer it to them so they can grab it again.



Remember to celebrate your wins, as well as letting your puppy enjoy theirs.

Stage 2: Teaching 'Drop'

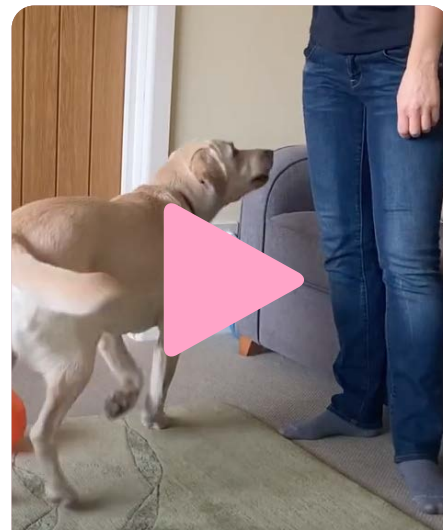
- Whilst you're playing, but when your puppy is not tugging at their hardest, offer them food rewards from one hand whilst keeping hold of the tug toy with the other.
- When your puppy opens their mouth to take the food rewards and drops the toy, leave the tug toy where it is and feed them several food rewards. Engage play with an alternative toy of the same value before picking up the tag toy.

- Once you see that they're reliably opening their mouth when you go to feed them, you can add in the cue 'Drop'. Say this word just before your hand approaches with food rewards; this way they will learn that 'Drop' = open mouth, and you will reinforce this with the food rewards.
- Go back to playing again when they have finished the food rewards and are showing calm behaviour.
- You don't have to end the game with you keeping the toy. If you let them win the toy in the final round, wait for them to lose a little interest in it naturally before swapping it for food rewards.
- Key tip – have your treats placed close by on a shelf or similar to prevent your puppy becoming more focused on the food than the play session.

Here are some other games you can play with your puppy:

- Hide and seek!
- Fetch
- Find it.

If you would like to learn more please speak with your Puppy Development Advisor.



Video: The stages of teaching drop.



Different puppies enjoy different games, work out what your puppy enjoys the most.

4. Introducing interactive food toys

In this section

In this section you'll learn how to teach your puppy to engage and remain engaged with food toys.

Quick links

By following each link below, you will be directed to the area within this guidance to support that area of learning.



Knowing your puppy



Managing for success



Teaching foundations



Being a partnership



Knowing your puppy

You will need to be confident in using the cues 'Okay' before beginning this exercise and be confident that your puppy is happy to have you near resources.



Managing for success

Your puppy's first experience of any new interactive toy should be easy and rewarding. They will learn quickly that the object they're playing with dispenses food. You can make it more difficult as they gain confidence and knowledge of how to use the toy.



Teaching foundations

Stage 1: The basics

- If you're introducing a KONG®, fill it with your puppy's kibble and walk with them to their bed.
- Show them the toy and wait for them to get on to their bed. Then place it down in front of them, allowing a few pieces of food to fall out of the toy as you do so.
- Stay close by, and help the food fall out of the toy if your puppy is reluctant to move it by themselves.
- Once they are engaged with the toy, move away.

Progression:

- Try part-filling the toy with their food and wedging a larger food reward inside so they must eat that before getting to the food beneath.
- Try soaking their kibble in water (leave it to soak for 5-10 minutes), then filling the KONG® with the softened kibble and giving it to them. Let them drink the water the food was soaking in.
- Try interactive toys which rely on movement to empty them, for example, the KONG® Wobbler or Gyro. Work out which of these toys your puppy shows an interest in.

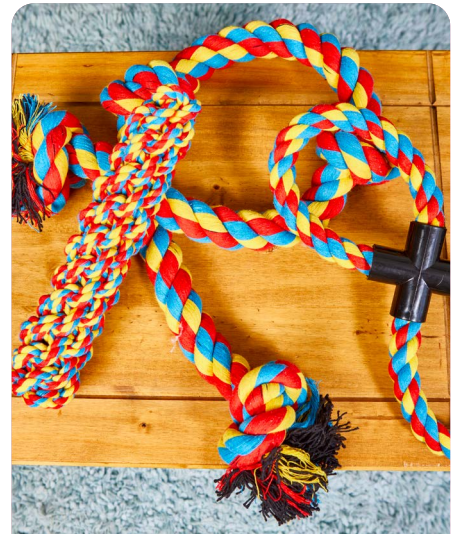


Photo: Suitable item to chew.



Photo: Suitable interactive toy.

Take the toy and your puppy to an area where they can move the toy around, without it getting stuck under furniture or damaging any of your possessions as they move it around.

- Wait for your puppy to show a calm behaviour, then give the release cue 'Okay' and quickly place the toy on the floor for them to investigate.
- If necessary, gently wobble or move the toy so that food falls out and encourage them to eat the food.
- Stay with them while they investigate, helping the food fall out if necessary.
- Let your puppy play until they have finished getting these last pieces of kibble from inside. Leave the toy with them and pick it up after they have lost interest.
- If you are concerned that they are likely to chew and damage it, swap it for a food reward or edible chew.

Stage 2: Developing their patience

- On hot days, or for an extra challenge when your puppy is experienced with the toy, try freezing it before giving it to them. This can be great for teething and help keep your puppy occupied for longer.
- You could also add a softer food (as a suggestion, you could use a spoonful of Chappie, a low-fat tinned dog food). Adjust their meal allowance accordingly if you're adding extra food so that they don't gain weight.



Stay with your puppy while they investigate.



[Video: KONG ® wobbler video.](#)



Being a partnership

Playing with your puppy is a great way to teach appropriate boundaries and reinforce good behaviour. Here are some tips to keep games fun and safe for everyone:

- Choose age-appropriate toys specifically designed for dogs and ensure they're durable and safe for your puppy to play with.
- It's important to use age-appropriate toys and play styles that won't strain the puppy's joints excessively and impact on their long-term well-being.
- Start with lower value toys. As your puppy becomes more familiar with play times, you can introduce higher value toys.
- Keep the activity sessions short and engaging. Two or three repetitions per session is enough to maintain your puppy's focus and interest.
- Begin each session at an easier level than the last time, so your puppy can build confidence and succeed in the exercise.
- If your puppy is overly excited and has difficulty controlling themselves around toys, keep them on a lead during playtime to maintain better control.
- Use interactive food toys to keep your puppy mentally stimulated. Start with easy fillings and gradually increase the difficulty as your puppy becomes more adept at solving the puzzles. Always supervise your puppy when introducing new interactive food toys to ensure their safety and prevent any potential accidents.
- Be consistent with the boundaries you set during playtime to avoid confusion for your puppy.

By following these guidelines and being patient and consistent in your approach, you and your puppy will have a lot of fun while also learning appropriate play behaviour and boundaries.