

Let The Games Begin

Youngsters of most species like to play. Elephant calves wrestle and chase each other, bighorn sheep lambs leap about, and otter pups slide down muddy hills just for fun. But in most species, play behavior dwindles with adulthood. Think about it. How many times have you seen a flock of adult sheep frolic in a meadow? And when grown elephants chase each other, things are about to get dangerous. But humans continue to play throughout life and, as any dog lover can testify, so do dogs. This might be another reason we have bonded so closely with them. In a nutshell: animals who play together stay together—shared fun is a strong relationship glue.

Take our mutual obsession with object-related play or, in nonscientific language, toys. There are toys galore, of course, but look no further than balls. Forget the occasional ball-uninterested dog and the person who doesn't care for sport; other kinds of toys appeal to them. Consider instead how many human play-related activities revolve around balls. Tennis, baseball, golf, football, soccer, bowling, cricket, volleyball, lacrosse, croquet, wiffleball, polo, basketball, squash, tetherball, stick ball... It's a very long list. To a visitor from another planet, humans would not seem that different in this respect to the Border Collie that refuses to give up her ball or the German Shepherd Dog that carries three tennis balls in his mouth. It's all about the little round thing!

Aside from the fuzzy warm feeling it gives us about our deep affinity with dogs, the knowledge that we are both highly play-motivated species can help us in other areas of life with dogs. The science of dog training tells us that the more rewarding an activity is, the more the dog learns. It's a win-win situation: Humans and dogs love to play—and fun accelerates your training results. Rather than commands issued in a Darth Vader-like voice, the training of behaviors from *sit* to *high five* can be made into a thoroughly enjoyable game for the two- and four-legged both. As Ralph Waldo Emerson put it, "It is a happy talent to know how to play."