

(Question)

An area I need advice on is swimming. We have a pond in our neighborhood and there are several in the public hunting area I run him in. He'll go into the water up to his chest, but that's it. I haven't forced him in, since I assume that could make him afraid of the water. Any tips on getting him to swim? He's never seen a dog in the water either.

(Answer)

You're thoughts on teaching him to swim are right on. You never want to force a pup into the water. The water should always be fun and exciting. Nothing bad ever happens in or near the water.

Often a puppy will mimic an older dog who likes to swim and fetch bumpers. Dogs can also be very competitive, so a puppy will sometimes get caught up in racing another dog for a bumper and before he knows it, he's swimming. If you have a friend with a dog that is already playing fetch at the water, I recommend putting together a few puppy play dates. NAVHDA training days are also excellent venues for doing this sort of thing, because there will be many other dogs there who are water and bumper "crazy."

It's really not warm enough outside that I'd be working on swimming. There's a long hot summer ahead. Once you start having 70+ degree days regularly, then start on it. It's a lot easier to get a puppy into a cool pond when he's hot. That's not to say you should stay away from the water between now and then. Our dogs get hot enough running in 40-degree weather that they'll get into the water to cool off. Expose your puppy to bodies of water as much as possible when you are giving him his off-lead runs. Just by being close to the water, he may happen upon something that catches his attention and gets him into the water to check it out. Or he may be running along the edge, accidentally fall in and find out he can swim! You can try tossing a stick or pine cone out a short distance and see what happens. He may surprise you can go right on in after it. I'd also start taking a few pieces of dog jerky in my pocket for a reward, because if he does go get the stick for you, you want to reinforce the behavior.

When you are going to work on water retrieving, you'll need a 4-foot nylon leash (it's going to get wet), 2 wide rubber bands, a ziploc bag containing a pack of hot dogs (2 of which have been cut into 1/4-inch slices), a puppy bumper (a/k/a Puppy Canvas Training Dummy) and a pocket full of half-dollar-sized rocks. Wear shoes and shorts you can get wet, because you may have to get into the water with your puppy.

After your puppy's had a long off-lead run and is good and hot, go to a pond or creek that has a gradual slope for entering the water to swimming depth. It helps if the bottom isn't muddy. It also helps if the water is clear so your puppy can see the bottom. Stand in the water near the edge and tease him with the bumper to get him excited. Use your voice, hide it behind your back, splash with it - do whatever it takes to get him excited. Then toss it into the water where he can reach it without having to swim. If necessary, toss rocks near it to make splashes that will help him see it and become interested in it. He'll probably bring it to shore or close to shore and drop it. That's OK. You're not working on his manner of retrieve, you're trying to get him to swim, so don't worry if he's not fetching it to you. Give him lots of praise and a piece of hot dog for a reward within 10 seconds of dropping the bumper. Keep doing this, but throw it a little further out each time, until he has to swim a tiny bit to reach it. Once he swims, go crazy with your praise, give him a big piece of hot dog and call it a day. In other words, end on a high note.

If your puppy cannot reach the bumper without swimming and he's reluctant to take that last step, but clearly wants the bumper because he's whining and/or barking at it - don't try to help him through verbal encouragement. Say absolutely nothing. Just stand back, watch and see how it plays out. Let the bumper tease him. Let him get frustrated. If you start talking, all you're going to do is distract your puppy away from the bumper. It will be totally counter-productive. I realize it's difficult to do this, but you must be quiet. Stand still, staring right at the bumper, which is an indication to your puppy that you too are very interested in it. Don't toss rocks at it unless your puppy starts to lose interest. As long as he's focused on the bumper, just watch and wait for what comes next.

Whenever you're using food rewards as part of your training, it helps a great deal if (a) the treats are special (he doesn't normally get them), very tasty (meat usually works best), don't require much chewing, and (b) the dog is hungry. So on training days, have him skip breakfast. If he still isn't motivated by your treats, use tastier treats and/or skip dinner the night before.

If your puppy won't swim to reach the bumper, you're going to have to get wet. Use the rubber bands to attach a whole hot dog to the bumper. Put the leash on your puppy. Wade out into the water to a depth where the puppy can still stand. Face the shore and squat down so you're almost eye level with your puppy. Hold the bumper out in front of you on top of the water and coax him to come get it. Let him take a small bite of the hot dog. Keep backing up a little bit at a time, giving him bites, until he has to swim to reach the bumper. Ideally he'll swim, grabbing the bumper with the hot dog attached and will then take it to shore. Let him have the whole thing and help him get the hot dog off the bumper. You want him to make the association of your hands on the bumper, giving him the hot dog. Use a lot of praise and be outwardly excited about what he just did. He needs to know you are THRILLED with him!

If your puppy won't swim voluntarily to grab the bumper, you're going to have to force the issue a little bit. Start over with coaxing him into deeper and deeper water to get bites of the hot dog that's attached to the bumper. When you get to the point where he'll have to swim to grab the bumper, pull gently on the leash so he must swim while simultaneously turning around slowly in a semi-circle so the puppy swims around you and is heading back toward the shore. Give him the bumper with the hot dog attached when he's facing the shore, drop the leash (he can easily swim with it dragging in the water), let him take the bumper to shore and help him eat the whole hot dog. Excitably praise and try it again.

You may have to do this a couple of times. Once you no longer have to use the leash to get him swimming, you should be able to transition to tossing the bumper (without a hot dog attached) into the water. Make the first few tosses short and easy. As soon as he brings the bumper to shore, or close thereto, place a piece of hot dog on the bumper for him to eat and give him lots of praise. Generally a puppy is quick to associate the bumper with the hot dog and within minutes you have a puppy who will literally launch himself off the bank to get the bumper.

Do not overdo this training. If you encounter a lot of resistance or the puppy isn't motivated by the hot dog, quit and try again in a day or two. Most puppies love hot dogs, but I've had a couple of puppies who didn't. I think maybe they found them to be too salty. If that happens, you need to substitute something they really like for the hot dogs. I've attached strips of cooked chicken and I've wrapped a bumper in lunch meat. Sometimes you'll get a puppy who doesn't grab the whole bumper, but instead grabs ahold of the hot dog. That's OK, but it can be a problem because when the bumper is floating, the hot dog flips underneath and the puppy can't see it. If

the puppy doesn't see the hot dog, he often won't try to grab the bumper. If you're having this problem, attach 2 hot dogs on opposite sides of the bumper.

Do not use the word "fetch," as this is a command and commands must be obeyed. The "fetch" command will come later, after his Natural Ability Test. Swimming for bumpers at this stage is just a fun game. As I'm walking to the water, I tease my puppy with the bumper and say "let's play!" Soon she knows what "let's play" and the bumper means - hot dogs! When you throw it, say something like, "go get it" or "bring it here."

Be sure to always quit this training on a high note. Don't let him get bored or tired of the game. Let him be successful, even if you have to "help" him with the leash, then quit for the day.