

training tips

Swimming Lessons

If you have a lab, golden or duck-tolling retriever, a Newfoundland, a spaniel, or a water dog you're probably saying "What's the big deal? My dog was born doing the dog paddle!"

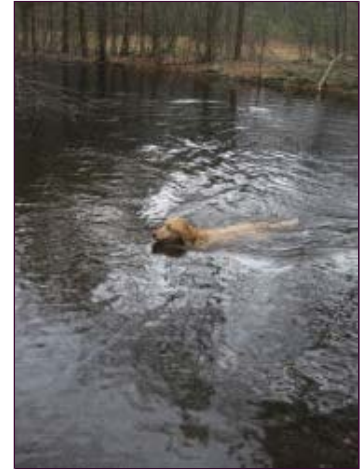
But if your beach buddy is short on legs, long in body, fearful or lacking confidence and a sense of adventure, a few lessons may be in order to get him or her into the swim of things this summer.

Swimming is great fun and exercise for you and your dog, especially senior and arthritic canines. The buoyancy of the water lessens stress on joints, gets obese dogs moving, helps dogs with hip dysplasia and builds strength and muscle tone. A 5-minute swim is equivalent to a 5-mile run—without the impact damage that comes with pounding the pavement.

Some dogs just naturally seem to take to the water. And some dogs don't. Like children, however, NO dog should ever be forced into it.

If your dog is water-phobic, here are a few training tips to help introduce him or her to one of the true joys of summer:

1. Not all dogs "instinctively" know how to swim. Never, ever toss your dog off the edge of a boat, into a pool or off a dock. Teaching a dog to swim requires patience and sometimes several attempts made over time. In addition to being dangerous, rushing the process can create panic, distrust, fear and anxiety.
2. Start introducing your dog to water at home, with a gentle hose spray or sprinkler. Encourage him to play in the water in a relaxed atmosphere. Invite him into a small, refreshing kiddie pool on a hot day and feed him his favorite treats.
3. Before heading to the shore for the real deal, you may want to buy a dog life jacket. It can help build up his confidence while he's learning to swim and is essential if you plan to take him out in your boat or canoe. Dog catalogs like SmartPak and FetchDog carry several styles, as do many hunting and marine catalogers/retailers. For an informative article about choosing the right floatation device, go to <http://www.boatus.com/foundation/Findings/findingsdog.htm>
4. Find a quiet location (preferably a clean pond or lake) for your dog's first lesson. Go on a weekday when the recreational area is less crowded. Choose a spot away from screaming, splashing kids, noisy jet skis, rocky terrain, and scary ocean waves. If safely possible, let your dog go off-leash (or use a long-line) and let him explore the shoreline on his own while you keep a discreet eye on him.
5. If your dog has a canine friend who is an experienced swimmer,



Some dogs like to enjoy the water from a distance.



Never introduce your dog to swimming by making him jump off a dock.

bring his buddy along. Your dog may just follow his lead and venture into the water on his own if he has a trusted friend leading the way.

6. If your dog does venture in on his own, praise him enthusiastically. When he gets comfortable in the water, throw a ball or favorite floating toy slightly deeper into the water for him to fetch. If he gets a bit over his head and swims (!!), praise him loudly when he fetches the toy and swims back to you. Repeat the process 10-15 times, alternating the throws...one time to a shallow area and the next to a depth that is only a little bit over his head. If he is hesitant to go over his head, keep your throws to the shallow depth and progress to deeper depths on another day. Patience is essential to success in swimming lessons.
7. If your dog exhibits fear and does not want to go in on his own, try going into the water yourself and coaxing him to join you, gently tugging on his leash and offering a favorite toy or treat. If he is still hesitant to join in the fun, gently and calmly carry your dog into knee or waist deep water.
8. Once in, immerse his torso in the water and place one hand under your dog's midsection and another under his hindquarters so he is level in the water. Continue supporting him and move him in circles around you until you see that he begins to dog-paddle with his legs. His feet should start to move as soon as they touch the surface. When he is vigorously paddling, face your dog toward shore and remove your hand from under the belly and briefly hold the rear end (or tail) up to keep your dog level. (If your dog begins to dog paddle with his front legs only, lift his hind legs and help him float. He should quickly catch on and will then keep his back end up.)
9. Have a friend who has stayed on the shore, clap and enthusiastically call your dog. Let go and watch him swim to shore where a delicious treat should be waiting as a reward along with lots and lots of praise.
10. If you are teaching your dog in a pool, first be sure your pool is equipped with a "scamper-ramp" (<http://www.skamper-ramp.com/home.asp?pid=1>) so your dog does not have to master two challenges: pool stairs AND swimming. Show him the scamper-ramp, take a few steps back from the edge and immerse and support him as above. Release and let him swim back to the scamper-ramp for an easy exit.
11. Repeat above steps in short increments to build up his confidence, strength and stamina. Again, never force your dog into the water.



Find a clean quiet place to teach your dog to swim.



A canine friend can encourage your dog to go in, too.



A cotton long line keeps your dog from going out too far.

Now that your dog is ready to make a splash at the pond, a few simple safety tips need to be observed:

- Don't overdo. Dogs, like humans, are susceptible to cramping and tiring. Don't let your dog overexert himself.
- Never let your dog swim unattended. Even in water, dogs can

"wander off" and swim until they are lost. Keep him tethered to you via a cotton long-line to ensure he doesn't swim too far away. If you overthrow a ball and it's out too far, sacrifice the ball and call your dog in.

- Never let your dog swim where there are even hints of undercurrents or riptides or rapidly flowing river water.
- Drinking sea water or even fresh pond water can make your dog sick. Always bring a container of fresh spring or tap water with you to refresh your dog.
- Rinse your dog off as soon as possible to remove salt, sand or chlorine. Bring a couple of towels—one for him to sit on and another to dry him off. Take extra care to dry moisture from behind and inside his ears.
- Prepare for emergencies. Learn CPR and pet first-aid.

Have a safe and fun-filled summer!



"COME on in....the water's fine!"