

Splish, Splash!

How to Teach Your Dog to Swim



By Gayle Watkins, Ph.D.

www.Avidog.com

Avidog
Empowering, Inspiring and Encouraging
Puppy Owners and Dog Breeders

Table of Contents

Some of the Things I Learned Along the Way	3
The FIVE Biggest Mistakes People Make.....	4
When Teaching Their Dog to Swim	4
Getting Started: Developing a Plan.....	5
Pick Your Place.	5
Pick Your Time.....	6
Bring the Right Gear.....	6
Step 1: Teach Your Dog to Like Not Fear the Water	8
Session 1: Introduction to Water	8
That’s it for Day 1.....	10
Next Sessions	10
Homework	10
Step 2: Teaching Your Dog to Swim	10
Session 1: Now, Let’s Swim	10
Next Sessions	11
Step 3: Swim Naked!	12
Session 1: Training Wheels Off.....	12
Next Sessions	13
Special Thoughts for Dogs and Swimming Pools.....	13
Congratulations!	14

Splish, Splash! How to Teach Your Dog to Swim

For many of us, watching our dogs play in the water is nothing short of wonderful! Splashing, wading, leaping, retrieving, diving—it's just all good fun. Spending a warm afternoon at the beach, lake, stream or pool is a perfect day for many owners and dogs. In addition, water is a healer. Older dogs, those with injuries, and dogs suffering from arthritis can benefit from hydrotherapy, including swimming or underwater treadmills. But none of this is possible if your dog hates or refuses to swim.

Splashing, wading, leaping, retrieving, diving—it's just all good fun. But none of this is possible if your dog hates or refuses to swim.

Every dog can learn to swim enough to stay afloat for a short time, although many do not want to. I've taught hundreds of dogs of all sizes, shapes and breeds to swim. In fact, I used to offer canine swimming lessons. Many owners spent time around the water and wanted their dogs to swim for their own safety. Others were boaters, hikers, kayakers, pool owners or beach lovers who wanted to share these activities with their dogs. So we taught, helped, cajoled and worked with each dog until they were at least safe in the water, if not fish.

Some of the Things I Learned Along the Way

- 1) Dogs are not born understanding what water is.** They do not naturally know that it is not solid, cannot hold their weight, that they cannot run on top of it, and that they must move horizontally not vertically. In fact, most dogs gallop into the water the first time thinking it is just like the land. Many panic when they go under. By the time they come up, they either love the water or deeply fear and hate it.
- 2) Although some dogs take to water from the first instant they touch it, the vast majority do not.** This larger group benefits from being gently introduced to water and swimming with people and dogs they trust.
- 3) How you teach your dog to swim can make or break its comfort with swimming for the rest of its life.** A good first impression goes a long way with dogs. Set your dog up to love the water and the two of you will have a lifetime of fun. Make your dog cold or frightened and you will have an uphill fight making him enjoy this activity with you.

The FIVE Biggest Mistakes People Make When Teaching Their Dog to Swim

After working with hundreds of owners and dogs, here are the biggest mistakes I've seen people do to get their dog to swim:

5. **Getting emotionally embedded in their dog's swimming.** We cannot hide our emotions so our dogs know if they have disappointed or frustrated us. Even if he has "retriever" or "water dog" in its pedigree, a dog may not inherently like the water. Our negative emotions put pressure on the dog, making things worse and causing the dog to be even more uncomfortable around the water.
4. **Giving the teaching process too little time.** Some people expect their dog will swim the first or second time out but just as with people, most dogs require a while to get comfortable around water before they start swimming.
5. **Staying on the shore or dock while trying to convince the dog to swim.** If the owner won't even wade, it is unlikely the dog will feel safe enough to swim because it means leaving his owner. I have no doubt that as we stand on dry land doing crazy antics to get them into the water, our dogs are wondering that if swimming is such a good deal, why are we staying on shore?
2. **Screaming at or scolding their dog when he shakes or jumps on them after he comes out of the water.** Dogs are often overly excited when they finally swim. They rush to their people to share their excitement and get yelled at or worse yet, punished. Although we want our dogs to be polite when wet, there is a time to teach a dog how to behave around water and it is not the first few time he swims.

And the Number 1 mistake people make when teaching their dog to enjoy the water is:

Splish, Splash! How to Teach Your Dog to Swim

- 1) Throwing, shoving, dragging or pushing him into the water.** This is nothing but a dirty trick that can terrify dogs AND make them distrustful of their owner and water. This is particularly important where the dog cannot easily get out of the water, such as most pools, docks and boats.

Only bullies push dogs into the water!



Getting Started: Developing a Plan

Some dogs take to the water right away. If that is your dog, enjoy his natural affinity for wet activities. If your dog does not fall into this category, let's get started teaching your dog to swim!

Pick Your Place. Find a safe, quiet swimming spot with relatively clean water. Ideally, it is a place with a gradual entry, such as a pond or beach. Look for quiet water with little current or waves. Swimming pools are not ideal. Dogs have trouble seeing stairs underwater so most feel like they are stepping off a ledge into a bottomless pit when they go off a step. In addition, if your pool doesn't have a ramp or bench, there are usually limited places a dog can safely get out. This can be frightening to both a panicked dog and his owner.

If all you have available is a pool, a fast running stream or a beach with waves, be sure to use a life jacket on your dog and go into the water with him.

Splish, Splash! How to Teach Your Dog to Swim

Pick Your Time. The ideal time to teach dogs to swim is when they will naturally want to use the water to cool off. So hot, humid days when the water is above 60 degrees is ideal. If you can't wait that long, then exercise your dog until he is hot and panting.

Bring the Right Gear. You won't need a lot of extra gear to teach your dog to swim but there are few items that will make the process easier.

- 1) **Life Jackets.** Doggie life jackets are essential to quickly teaching dogs to enjoy the water and swim safely. Not only do they keep your dog safe but they enable him to learn how the doggie paddle feels without fear or panic. Get a life jacket/vest with a handle on the top so you can control your dog and keep his head and body above water. I love Outward Hound's life jackets.



- 2) **Collar and Leash.** Put your dog on a buckle collar and leash that you do not mind getting wet. This is not the time for harnesses, choke collars, prongs or any other collar but keeping your dog under control will help make sure he doesn't panic.
- 3) **Beach Clothes for You.** Wear clothes and shoes that you don't mind getting wet and dirty. A swimming suit or shorts with old tennis shoes, beach runners or Keen-type sandals will ensure you are comfortable while you work with your dog.
- 4) **Water-Loving Human and Canine Friends.** Extra hands and good role models help a lot when teaching dogs to swim. Things will go easier, if you have a family member or friend to help. If you also have a dog buddy who loves the water, bring her along to show your dog the way.
- 5) **Your Dog's Favorite (Floating) Toys.** If your dog enjoys toys, bring along a few that float. Tennis balls and bumpers are favorites for many dogs but anything that your dog likes that will float will work. My dogs love the Air

Splish, Splash! How to Teach Your Dog to Swim

Kong toys. Leave the sinking toys at home since you'll have your hands full with your dog.



- 6) **Towels.** Bring towels or synthetic chamois to dry him off and warm him up afterwards. If you let him get chilled, he will quickly learn that getting wet causes discomfort. After his first swims (or wades), dry him off and warm him up with a walk or car ride. My favorite is The Absorber, which is light to carry but quickly gets the water off almost



every dog's coat.

- 7) **Portable Lawn Chair (optional).** Bring a chair that you can use in the water. Regular beach chairs are great for this. Avoid the really low ones that keep you just off the sand or you will get wetter than you may want. The old-fashioned aluminum chairs with webbing work great.



- 8) **Dog Treats that Float (optional).** Some dog treats float and can be helpful to reward dogs that are really worried about the water. I always used Charlie Bears for swimming treats.

Step 1: Teach Your Dog to Like Not Fear the Water

Session 1: Introduction to Water

It's a warm day and your dog is hot and panting. You put him on leash and just wade into the water. Most likely he will stop at the water's edge or wade in to his ankles. That's fine, you just enjoy the coolness of the water and tell your dog how great it is. Now start walking parallel to the shore rather than out into the water. Allow your dog to walk along the shore or in the shallow water. Praise his bravery (even if he hasn't shown it yet 😊) and keep telling him how much you are enjoying spending this time with him.



Everyone in the water! If you have friends with you, everyone is in the water, wading parallel to shore. No one is left on shore except your dog. If your dog balks completely, turn partially away from him and stop. Take a deep breath to relax and wait. The instant your dog loosens the leash, praise him warmly. Do not drag or force your dog to come into the water. Above all, do not splash him with the water. Just encourage him to join you in the water, even if just toe deep.

If you have a water-loving dog with you, have someone hold your dog on shore while you play with the swimmer in the water. Let your dog see another dog swim and get an idea how it is done. But don't just let him follow the other dog into the water or you might have to go save him and that might set you back quite a ways.

Then go back to your dog to see if he willingly steps into the water. As he does, move parallel to the shore so he stays at the same depth. This allows him to build his confidence in the water without having to go deeper right away. Walk slowly to let him realize what is under the water. If he gets frightened by something, let him get out of the water but don't let him run away in a panic. We want him to know he can get safe simply by stepping out of the water, there is no need to bolt.

Splish, Splash! How to Teach Your Dog to Swim

Lots of praise. Praise your dog a lot while he is in the water, no matter how deep he goes or worried he is. You want him to know that you are proud of and happy with him when he is in the water.

Now, head to shore. After 3-4 minutes of walking back and forth along the shore, calmly walk out of the water. Say nothing to your dog. Let him shake off the water, lick his wet feet or roll in the grass, all ways that dogs dry themselves. Walk slowly near the shore for a few minutes while remaining quiet.

Repeat. Walk into the water again. Stay about the same distance as before and as soon as your dog gets his feet wet, start praising and cheering him on. Stay close enough to shore that he can stand in the water. Encourage him to come to you but do not force him. Warmly praise each step he takes deeper into the water. Once he comes to you, tell him how fabulous he is and pet him. Then calmly walk out of the water and be quiet. We want him to realize how happy you are with him in the water and that you are quiet out of the water.

Take a seat. If your dog simply will not get his toes wet, get him hot again. Run, play tug or retrieve to get him panting. Then get your beach chair and set it up in the water so when you sit down, you are facing parallel to the shore, not out to sea or back at the shore. Give your dog enough leash that he can stay dry and then sit down. Check your phone, read a book, soak up the sun, watch the kids play. In other words, ignore your dog and relax. Spend 10 to 20 minutes hanging out in the water. Be sure your dog has no friends on shore with him. Everyone should be in the water so if he wants to be with everyone, he has to get wet. Do not force the issue...let him decide when he is ready to come in.

If he comes in, praise him warmly and let him get comfortable walking in the water. Then stand up and walk parallel to the shore. Move slowly so he doesn't get frightened by you, the water moving or the footing beneath the water.

Be patient. If he doesn't even dip his toes, don't worry. After 10 to 20 minutes, just walk out of the water and get him hot again. Go for a walk, play a game, throw his toy. Try to get him hotter than before then go sit in your water chair again. If he even looks at the water, tell him how fabulous he is. You can even toss him a treat, ideally one that floats like a Charlie Bear. Hang out for another 10 minutes or so, facing parallel to the shore and praising your dog for any attempt to enter the water.

Splish, Splash! How to Teach Your Dog to Swim

That's it for Day 1. That's a great first session. Calmly walk out of the water, dry him off, tell him how fabulous he is and take him home.

Next Sessions

Repeat Session 1 until your dog is comfortably walking with you in the water. Your goal is to get him to go in belly deep on his own. Do not worry how long this takes but do not go on to the next step until your dog will walk into the water up to his belly with or without your encouragement.



Homework

Before you take your dog for his first swimming lesson, take some time to properly fit his life jacket using the manufacturer's instructions. Let him wear it a time or two while you give him plenty of yummy treats. He doesn't have to love the jacket, he just needs to be willing to walk around in it. Keep telling him how amazing he is when he is wearing it.

Step 2: Teaching Your Dog to Swim

Session 1: Now, Let's Swim

The big day is here! You are going to give your dog his first swimming lesson. He has already learned to tolerate or even enjoy being with you in the water. He knows he can walk safely with you. Perhaps he has even seen another dog swimming.

Now you are going to put his life jacket on and walk into the water. When he joins you, walk parallel to the shore and each time you turn around to go back the other way, go out a little bit more into the deeper water. Stroll slowly, telling your dog how proud you are of him.

Into the deep, slowly. The first time he steps into deeper water, the life jacket will keep him afloat so you can calmly steer him back to shallower water. You are showing him that it is safe to go out deeper because he can always get his feet back under him. If he gets frightened and wants to go to shore, use the leash to let him do so at a walk. Do not let him run or bolt.

Splish, Splash! How to Teach Your Dog to Swim

Keep walking back and forth in the deeper water. This time when the vest gets him floating, gently steer him beside you. The vest will keep his back and head up so he can swim. His legs will automatically start paddling when he can't touch bottom so he is now swimming!! Yahoo! Praise him for being so fabulous and then guide him to shore.

At this point, many dogs want to run out of the water and figure out what just happened. If he insists, let him do so for a minute or two but then get right back in the water.

A word of warning, dogs swim automatically and strongly so they don't pay a lot of attention of where their feet are. As a result, if you get in front of your dog, you can get badly scratched by his toenails. Stay at his side and use the vest to guide him so you stay safe.

Your dog now knows he can safely swim in the water. He is doing a real doggie paddle with his back level and head out of the water.

If he is still game, gently take him out into the deeper water, turn him toward shore and let him swim in. Walk with him to make sure he doesn't get turned around. Then dry him off and take him home. What a great day!

A word of warning, dogs swim automatically and strongly so they don't pay a lot of attention of where their feet are. As a result, if you get in front of your dog, you can get badly scratched by his toenails.

Next Sessions

Repeat Session 1 on warm or even hot days. Over the next three or four sessions, you will get an idea if your dog is going to love swimming or just tolerate it. Go in with your dog and play in the water. Be sure the play is fun for the dog.

- Do not splash him unless he likes it! Some dogs love to bite at water, others hate water being tossed on them.
- Do not push him AWAY from shore! Always walk him out and push him towards the shore.
- Do not use the leash to drag him out into swimming water.

Step 3: Swim Naked!

You can stop at Step 2 if your dog truly hates the water AND you do not have a pool or boat. You have taught your dog the basics of paddling so he won't panic if he ends up in the water by accident.

However, if your dog enjoys the water OR if he has any chance of falling into the water without his life jacket on, go on to Step 3, teaching him to swim naked. This step is essential if you boat with your dog or own a swimming pool.



The challenge when you take off your dog's life jacket is that he will get frightened. When this happens, most dogs drop their hind end and go vertical. Vertical dogs can't make forward progress and begin to panic. Their desperate paddling starts splashing water in their faces and they try to rise out of the water to get away from it.

This is very tiring and hinders them from getting to shore.

Your goal then is to keep this from happening. You have already helped your dog learn to swim horizontally by using a life jacket. Now you are going to show him he can swim this way without the jacket.

Session 1: Training Wheels Off

Pick a warm day at your usual swimming hole. Take your dog into the water with his collar and leash on. If he likes toys, bring some along.

Take him out into the deeper water and aim him toward shore but keep your hands under his belly to keep him horizontal in the water. Help him swim to shore, letting him feel his own body swimming.

Repeat this up to a dozen times this session, taking him a little further out each time. Stay with him but gradually



Splish, Splash! How to Teach Your Dog to Swim

take your hands further away from him. Always be ready to step in to help but allow him to swim on his own.

Next Sessions

Take your dog swimming without his life jacket a few more times. If he enjoys the water, do some retrieving with him. Swim out deeper with him. If he stays calm and does not go vertical, he is ready to go boating, kayaking, canoing, swimming and hiking with you.

If he still does not like the water, you at least know that he will be safe around it. Commit to keeping his life jacket on when you are doing water activities with him.

Special Thoughts for Dogs and Swimming Pools

The most important thing you will teach your dog if you have a pool is how to get out! Many dogs die in pools each year when they fall in and do not know how to get out. Unless someone realizes what has happened, they eventually tire and drown.

So your first rule must be that your dog **ONLY** gets out via the steps initially. If your dog loves the pool, you can teach him other ways out of the pool. For example, you can teach him to go up a ladder if he is big enough or you can purchase a dog ramp for him.

Even the strongest swimmer can be unnerved by swimming pools because dogs cannot see the steps under the water. They feel like they are stepping off a ledge and wisely, they aren't sure they can get out.



Show him the way. To help your dog understand there are steps, go in with him. Let him settle on each step until he gets an idea of how large (or small) it is. However, even with this introduction, most dogs will not take the leap off the step into the water. So be prepared to use the life vest or just carry

Splish, Splash! How to Teach Your Dog to Swim

your dog out into the pool, turn him toward the steps and let him swim in. Walk with him and control him with the leash so he swims to the steps not the side of the pool.

If he gets to the side, guide him to the steps. Do not let him climb up the side of the pool or panic when he gets to it. Use his collar, leash and vest to get him to the steps. Requiring him to always exit the pool at the steps may save his life someday so always, always, always do it!

Congratulations!

You have done it! You have taught your dog to be safe around the water, and possibly even to enjoying swimming and playing in the water. This is a great accomplishment for both of you.



Splish, Splash! How to Teach Your Dog to Swim



Lise, Gayle and Marcy with their best friends

Dr. Gayle Watkins, Marcy Burke and Lise Pratt have been breeding and raising puppies for upwards of three decades. During their time “in dogs,” they have helped thousands of owners teach their dogs to be pleasant, happy companions. Their true passion is rearing puppies--from conception to 12 months--to become happy, stable, healthy dogs that enrich their owners’ and often other people’s lives. Through their company, Avidog[®], this trio of dog lovers offers online courses, seminars and webinars to help puppy owners and dog breeders create the dogs of their dreams.

Avidog

Empowering, Inspiring and Encouraging
Puppy Owners and Dog Breeders

Avidog[®] International

PO Box 66

Highlands, NC 28741

info@avidog.com

www.Avidog.com