

Q

I love swimming, kayaking and sailing. What can I do to encourage my dog to join me on these water adventures?

● Arden Moore ● Steve Brooks

WHEN I MOVED TO SAN DIEGO COUNTY and adopted Chipper and Cleo, I got an unexpected bonus: both of these shelter rescues were water lovers. In no time, we were swimming, kayaking and yes, even surfing together.

I fondly nicknamed them, Salty Dog and Chip Ahoy. But not every dog loves water and more importantly, not every dog is a natural swimmer. If you are into water activities, own a boat or a backyard pool, practice patience when it comes to encouraging your dog to join you.

It is key to “read” your dog accurately. Watch your dog’s reaction when you walk at a harbor and how he reacts to getting his feet and body wet along shore. Tucked tails, lip licking, cowering and pulling on the leash to escape are all signals that your dog is afraid and unsure. In contrast, confident dogs with relaxed body postures, open smiling mouths, wagging or upright tails are more willing to be introduced to swimming or exploring your canoe or kayak.

Let me unleash some water safety tips:

- Fit your dog with a canine life jacket that includes a handgrip you can easily grab. Use treats and praise to reinforce a positive association of wearing the jacket for your dog.
- Closely shadow your dog as he paddles in your pool and gains his confidence and swimming skills.
- Ensure your dog heeds the basic cues: sit, stay, come, no and leave it. You do not want him to dash into any body of water without permission.
- Train your dog the safe way to enter and exit your pool. Tether a leash to his life jacket and teach him the “safety spot” the stairs at the shallow end of the pool. If possible, buy a floatable doggie ramp or stairs to prevent your dog from paddling the pool perimeter, getting fatigued and frustrated and worse, drowning. Invest in a doggie-proof gate around the pool.
- Introduce your dog to your canoe or kayak while he is on the beach. Reward him when he sits. Then climb in and gently rock side to side. Speak in a calm, confident tone to your dog. If your dog appears happy, go ahead and take a brief paddle with him along the shoreline.
- Apply dog-safe sunscreen on your dog’s abdomen, legs and tip of the nose to prevent sunburns.
- Stop water activities (like fetching floating balls) before your dog exhibits any signs of fatigue.
- Look into dog swim and water safety classes in your area.

Parting tip: Enroll in a pet first aid/CPR class so you know what to do in a pet emergency and always pack a pet first aid kit before beginning your water adventures. 🐾

ARDEN MOORE hosts the *Oh Behave* weekly radio show on [Pet Life Radio.com](http://PetLifeRadio.com) and is founder of the www.petfirstaid4u.com program.

FOR WATER ADVENTURES, START ON DRY LAND. Training essentials include: come, stay, go to a spot, up and over, walk without pulling, targeting, retrieve, sit on your lap, and accept being lifted. Provide water, shade (if the ground is too hot for your feet, it’s too hot for Fido’s), Vet-recommended sunscreen and a properly fitted life jacket. Doggie splash pads are a good alternative for canines who may not be water hounds.

Swimming: I taught my toy poodle mix, Uni, to swim at our new home in about six weeks (depending on the level of apprehension your dog has to water and time spent training; some take longer or never love the water, and that’s ok). Keep sessions short with plenty of breaks. As a dog trainer who does not advocate the use of force, I practice using positive reinforcement.

The trepidation your dog shows toward water indicates where to start training: right before they show fear.

Training sessions include a less-intense version of the pool until the fearful reaction dissipates. Uni came two feet from the edge of the pool before becoming apprehensive; that’s where I started training:

- Practice getting on a raft on dry land
- Place raft in a shallow kiddie pool; deliver tasty treats and favorite retrieve toy!
- Place raft with favorite toy in pool; reward increased interest
- Target stick (touch with nose to move into positions) to approach water without force
- Swim to edge of pool, ask to come as close as comfortable (Uni’s threshold: two feet); hold target stick (touch with nose); click and toss treat closer to the edge (never grab or throw a dog into water)
- Instead of tossing treat, Uni would have to accept being pet while I delivered the treat
- Call Uni to the edge to give a “kiss” (without grabbing him)
- Sit on steps until he finally has enough trust to sit on lap

I exposed Uni to the pool, at such a low intensity, that it did not elicit an anxious or fearful response.

Before I knew it, Uni dove into the water to get his toy! His natural instinct of hunting waterfowl kicked in...now swimming is his favorite!

Kayaking & Sailing: Wearing a doggie life jacket, teach getting in and out (“up and over”) on dry land first, using targeting if necessary. Improve balance with discs, balls, bands, and K9 conditioning equipment. Practice leash skills on the dock or marina. Many dogs jump out at the first sign of wildlife, so ensure training is solid, even with distractions. Watch for signs of fear/anxiety: lip licking, yawning, tucked tail, ears back, whining, shaking (unless it’s cold or your dog is wet).

Water sports are not for every doggie so be happy with baby steps that your dog offers and don’t be afraid to lower criteria during training. Your dog may just surprise you! 🐾

STEVE BROOKS (CPDT-KA), Certified Professional Dog Trainer (CPDT/KA), Canine Behavioral Expert and author of *DOG BITES* with STEVE BROOKS, shares 20 years of training techniques using “dog bites” as rewards for good behavior. SteveBrooksK9U.com