

Teach your pup to swim.

Dogs are land mammals and are not born knowing how to swim. Occasionally a young dog will wade right in and go, but most pups need a gentle introduction and some encouragement to swim.

When I can, I start my pups on the water as soon as I bring them home, but the techniques are the same for pups and grown dogs.

The main point to remember when introducing a pup to the water is don't push or rush him. Give the pup a reason to want to swim, either to retrieve, to follow you, or to chase another dog, and then allow him to choose to swim.

Once the pup knows he can swim, be sure to supply sufficient practice so he can learn to swim well. Much later in training you can work on force fetch and obedience to commands on the water.

Do not force or throw the dog in the water. He knows he doesn't naturally know how to swim, and if you rush him he may panic. If you make your pup afraid of the water your job will be much harder.

#### How to Help Your Pup Learn to Swim

The best set-up for getting him started swimming is warm water, a warm day, and a bottom that drops off gradually. I usually wade in and walk or play with other dogs in the water. If you have a shallow stream, a long walk on a hot day is perfect. Your pup will feel good about the trip and sooner or later he will find himself in over his shoulders and swimming.

If your pup likes to retrieve, throw bumpers or balls where he can still keep his feet on the bottom and retrieve. As he settles in and becomes more comfortable, gradually throw his toy or bumper farther out, at some point he will have to swim to get it.

Sometimes I wade in holding the pup and have my wife or helper stand a short distance away in the water. I gently lower the pup into the water and release him when he begins to swim. We call the pup back and forth. As he gains confidence we back away from each other so he must swim farther each time.

One of my training ponds has a small island 50 feet long and 20 feet wide. This island is only 60 feet from the nearest shore. Big dogs can walk most of the way across but must swim a bit in the middle to get to shore. I have rowed a reluctant swimmer out in a john boat and left him on the island and rowed away. I call him to the boat a short distance from shore, or I work dogs on the shore and wait. No dog has stayed on the island long.

#### Swimming Stages

When they begin to swim most pups will swim with the front end only. This results in a

head-up, splashing stroke that is not very effective or efficient. This "puppy splashing" is common. With more experience a pup will engage his rear end and level out and swim.

Typically, a new swimmer will start by splashing his way out and back to retrieve his bumper or ball. At some point you'll observe that he splashes out to retrieve but swims on the return.

Once they begin to swim well on the return, it's just a short time until most dogs begin to swim on the way out, too.

Some pups will go through these stages in one day, some in a week. Most dogs introduced to the water after six months of age take a little longer to work through these stages. Over the years I have had a few dogs that splashed for eight or 10 weeks before they swam well. With enough time, even the most determined splashers eventually learned to dig in and swim.

A final caution: be very careful about training on cold water. Cold water can be very uncomfortable and once your dog learns he doesn't like cold water I don't think you can change his mind. While dogs can and do hunt in water that is iced over, the rewards built into hunting are huge and regular. In training dogs must often repeat and put out great effort, usually for the small reward of a plastic bumper. Some trainers like 56-degree water, while others say 60 degrees is their preferred water temperature for training. For pups I want it warmer than that, with warm air temperatures as well.

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