

To swim or not to swim? That is the question.

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Versatile Hunting Dog
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What should you do if your pup will not swim, and there are only two months until the Natural Ability Test?

The day is hot, the water is warm, the entry for the water is gradual and there is not much wind. Still, your pup will not swim. The pup goes in up to its chest and will not step off of the drop off. Doesn't the pup understand there is a test in two months? It is time to be inventive! Swimming comes naturally to dogs, but the knowledge that they will float when they step off the drop off sometimes takes some work.

The best time to socialize a pup to water is at eight to twelve weeks. They are small, and you can go in up to your knees, set them into the water and let them swim back to shore. You will notice that, before the puppy touches the water, the legs will start moving as if swimming. No pup is too young to socialize to the water. I know many breeders that take six week old pups and their dam down to the water, and the pups will follow her in. Sometimes pups are born in the fall and go home in the winter. You may be dealing with ice or cold water. If this happens, there will be no putting the puppy in the water until spring when the pup is a little older.

You can try to use another dog to encourage or make the pup jealous. Sometimes this works if the pup really likes to retrieve. I would recommend that you use two bumpers to make sure the pup has something to retrieve. Sometimes the pup learns that the older dog will do all the swimming, and they can wait on shore for the bumper.

If you have socialized the pup to the water, tried to make the pup jealous with another dog, tried swimming with your pup and nothing works, it is time to apply a little force. This process also works if your pup does not like bumpers. No bumpers are needed at first. I put on waders or a swimming suit (if it is warm enough) and go in up to my waist or chest, depending on the size of the pup. I put a check cord on the pup and get it so that it is at the edge of the drop off. I do not pull the puppy to me. I make it uncomfortable so the pup decides to jump off. To make the pup uncomfortable, I tug and release the check cord so the puppy gets uncomfortable standing there. Once the pup decides to leave the drop off, I catch the pup and give lots of praise. Sometimes I have to pull the puppy towards me once it starts to swim. Then I face the puppy towards shore and let it swim to shore. I only give the pup enough slack so its feet can touch, not enough to leave the water. I call the pup back to the edge of the drop off, tug and release on the check cord and make it step off on its own and again, I catch the pup. I will keep repeating this until the pup will step off and swim to me without tugging on the check cord.

When the pup is comfortable swimming to me, then I stand at the drop off next to the pup and throw a bumper a few feet into swimming depth water. If the pup does not want to go, I step off

the drop off and tell the pup to "Get It!" If the pup still will not go, I will tug the check cord a little. Once the pup starts swimming, I give lots of praise and try to get it over to the bumper that I threw. I will keep trying to get the pup to swim with me standing at the drop off next to the puppy. Once the pup is confident and jumping off the drop off on its own, I will back up a little with each throw until I am standing at the shore.

If the pup does not like bumpers, "Get It!" now becomes the command to swim. When standing next to the pup at the drop off, I will give the bumper a short toss into swimming depth water and tell the pup to get it. The pup probably is not going to go. I hook my finger in the collar and give a little push to make the pup swim. I will praise a lot and maybe give the pup a treat when it comes back. Hot dog pieces work really well. As the pup gains confidence and will swim after the bumper when told to get it, I will start to take away the treat and just rely on praise. I will also start to get a little closer to the shore with each throw. If I throw the bumper and say, "Get it~ and the pup will not go, I will say, "No!" I take the pup to the edge of the drop off, hook my finger in the collar and make the pup swim. When the pup is swimming, I will give lots of praise and maybe a treat. The goal is to be on shore, throw a bumper, say, "Get It!" and the pup will go to the drop off and swim.

The next day when I come to the water, I will start by standing at the drop off with the pup and keep backing up with each throw until I am at the shore line. Each day I start by standing a little closer to the shore line. Eventually I am standing on the shore throwing a bumper.

There are a few things about this technique that need to be discussed. First, your pup may not be happy with you and/or the water. Additionally, you have to teach the pup to have confidence and that the pup can do it. Once the pup learns this, the pup will be happier and more confident. On that first day, you must make the pup aware that it can float and trust that you will catch it. If this is not accomplished, you will defeat your purpose. The pup will be more afraid of the water. You cannot quit with that first session until the pup is stepping off on their own and swimming to you. If you follow through with this training concept, you will have a confident swimmer and a happy hunter.

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