

How to Stimulate your Dog's Mind

Stimulating your dog's mind and challenging him to try new things is one of the keys to fulfillment. Finding ways to work with a dog's instinctual nature can bring out the best in them. The walk offers a structured routine that allows you to bond with your dog, but playtime can give you more opportunities to challenge them, enrich their lives, and establish an even deeper bond.

Many owners think "play" means letting their puppy run wild, but play sessions can be productive and fun too with some focus that allows a mental component in addition to the physical. A dog plays two ways – first as a dog, and second as a breed. Channeling that energy and knowing the difference is the key to making it a positive learning experience.

1. Stimulate the nose.

All dogs can track using their most powerful sense – their nose. Make a game out of hiding their food or play hide-and-seek with treats. You can build obstacle courses for your dog out of boxes, sturdy containers, and portable stairs. Rub the scent in various spaces, hiding the meal or the high-priced treat in the toughest place to find. It encourages the dog to problem solve and as a result, builds confidence too. Think of this as a sort of Easter egg hunt for the dog. You can hide treats and high-priced toys all over the house or yard even! I've played this "game" with all of the pups I've raised over the years.

2. Use your imagination.

You don't have to spend a ton of money on toys or tools. Remember when you're a kid and you built fortresses in the family room out of sheets and chairs and sofa cushions? You can do the same with your dog and create an agility course at home. Use treats to lure the dog by scent into the area and activity you want them to perform. Be patient. They might not get it right away, but as with any sport, practice makes perfect! Remember that

all kinds of toys sold in stores can be made at home too. Treat balls are a lot of fun, but hiding kibble in an empty plastic water bottle can be just as exciting. The dog doesn't know the difference. This can be a challenging way to feed them too because it forces them to problem solve and earn their food. I know some dogs that learn how this works so quickly that they realize if they put the bottle in their mouth and turn their head, all the food comes out at once!

3. Play like a dog.

All dogs love to run and chase things (even if they don't naturally retrieve, all dogs can learn). One game I like to play: Tie a string to the end of a long stick, then tie a soft stuffed animal onto the string. Dangle it in front of your dog to catch their eye contact and attention. To make it even more interesting, stuff it with a treat or rub it with the scent of a treat or food. Instead of moving it frantically, which is our natural human inclination, move it slowly, stopping and starting again. This encourages the dog to focus the excitement and leave you in control – the faster you go, the more you drain their physical energy; the slower you go, the more you challenge their mind. Additionally, it nurtures their natural prey drive in a focused, disciplined way that is fun for them and you.

4. Discipline can be fun too!

One of the ways people often teach a puppy their name is to play hide-and-seek, literally, not just with a treat. Once a dog has learned the "stay" command, this becomes a really fun exercise. It's also a way to teach "come" with the word "come" or whatever sound you choose, a whistle for example. It works like this: you say "stay" and then go hide in another room or behind a tree or wherever. Keep the proximity close at first and then gradually increase the distance. When you are in your hiding place, make the come sound or say the word. Then patiently wait for the dog to find you. Don't say his name or the command again. Give their mind a chance to work it out. When he finds you, reward him with a treat. It's that simple. They'll get better and better at it and once they do, you can move to larger areas like a park.

5. Tug of War -- But Be Aware of the Risks

With the amount of ropes and toys available that encourage tug of war, it's not surprising that so many dog owners play this game with their dog. However, you need to be aware of the risk. It's a game that brings out the predator in your dog and can be unhealthy for your relationship if you don't have trust and respect to begin with. You need to have control over your dog's power and instincts before you can engage in a healthy game of tug of war with them.