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Factsheet

Play and mental stimulation



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Play and mental stimulation are vital for you and your dog. They can increase the bond between you, help you control your dog and reduce his boredom.

There are many ways that dogs play and they all have a purpose:

- To build or cement a bond between individual dogs
- To help your dog release stress
- To exercise his body and stimulate his mind
- To break down inhibitions
- Play can help your dog measure and compare himself with others
- It can be lots of fun

The amount of playtime during the day varies hugely between individual dogs. Some dogs will play until they are completely exhausted; others have virtually no interest in playing. Aside from personality, there are other factors which will affect how keen your dog is to play including their level of interest in a particular toy, how tired they are, or whether they find something else in the environment more interesting; games become a lot less appealing when the world is full of exciting sights and smells!



Benefits for you and your dog

Playing with your dog can help you to learn a great deal about him. As well as finding out the basics, like which toys he likes and dislikes, you also learn about his body language. You can see when he is enjoying himself, is tense with excitement or when he is relaxed. These are all emotions he will repeat in other aspects of his life and you will be better able to read them.

Ideally, throughout the game your dog should be focused on you, looking to see what your next move will be – you become the centre of his attention. Your dog sees you as something interesting, fun and worth paying attention to. The effect of this can be beneficial to the other training that you do with your dog. For example, teaching recall is much easier if you have your dog's attention in the first place. Commands you teach during play can be used in other aspects of life. A "leave" command could just as easily apply to your shoe as to your dog's squeaky toy. Similarly, playing with your dog in the wrong way will also have an effect on other parts of training and indeed your life with your dog.



He's interesting, fun and worth paying attention to!

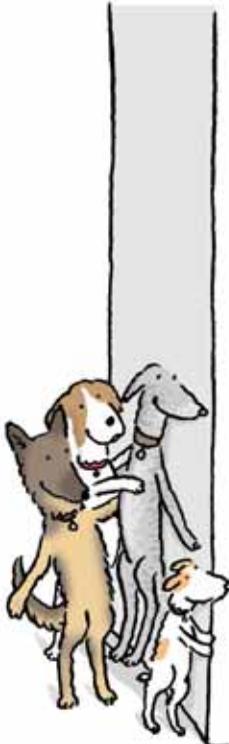


How to get your dog to play

First, select a suitable toy. For your dog to want to interact with it, the toy must be something he finds interesting and fun. Like people, all dogs are individuals and have different ideas about what is the perfect toy. Some dogs love toys which make a noise, others like balls and others are crazy about rope toys.

Choose a time when you are relaxed and not in a rush. Your dog may not know automatically how to play the game you have chosen so it may take him a bit of time to figure it out. Some dogs need a bit more encouragement than others when it comes to games and you might have to run around and make silly noises or even get other dogs involved in the play to get them into the spirit of things.

The dog's breed can also play a part in the type of toy he wants to play with and the type of games he likes to play. For instance, Terriers tend to love shaking and ripping apart soft toys and Border Collies usually can't resist chasing a toy that has been thrown.



What type of game?

There are several basic types of games that you can play with your dog to encourage him to make use of different senses. It is important to choose games that your dog enjoys and those that stimulate his brain but don't encourage him to get out of control.

Chase and retrieve

The first step is to find a toy that interests your dog enough to want to chase after it. Secondly, there has to be a reason for your dog to want to return to you with the toy. For some dogs the possibility of you throwing it again is enough, others might need a treat or another toy offered in exchange, this may depend on your dog's breed. Retrieve games are beneficial because they often involve the dog using up large amounts of energy – many dogs will cover miles chasing a ball across a field. However, there must also be an element of control in the game. If you have not achieved recall with your dog and he is not inclined to bring his toy back to you at the end of the game, getting him back on his lead could become much more difficult. Some dogs, especially Border Collies, can get obsessed with chasing the ball and are actually barely thinking about what they are doing. If your dog really enjoys retrieve games then continue to play them but alternate them with some more challenging games to get his brain working.

Search games

Search games are a more advanced version of the retrieve games that encourage your dog to think a bit more. Search games could be as simple as hiding food around the garden, or hiding your dog's favourite toy in the house. He then has to find and bring the item to you. The reward for finding the toy could be a game of retrieve or a treat when he brings the object to you. Search games can be beneficial for excitable dogs; they need to concentrate on the game so they are kept calmer than they would be with more interactive games. Varying the object to be found and the location will really keep your dog on his toes!



Tug of war

Many dogs, especially the bull breeds, really enjoy tug of war. These types of games can be a useful way of diverting mouthing and chewing from hands or clothing onto a toy. However, the danger with these games is that many dogs quickly become over excited and it can be difficult to calm them down or indeed stop the game when you want to. If you do want to play this kind of game with your dog then there must be an element of control. It is important to teach a "leave" command so that you can get your dog to drop the toy when you want to finish the game. Never play tug of war with anything that is not your dog's toy.



Safety, safety, safety.

It is important that your dog is supervised at all times during play and that all toys are non-toxic and solvent free.

It is best to use toys that are specifically designed as dog toys but you may want or need to improvise at times. Sticks do not make good toys as they can shatter and splinter if chewed or swallowed. Toys should not be small enough to be swallowed or have any pieces that are detachable and could be swallowed (for example buttons or zips on a soft toy designed for children). You should never allow him to play or exercise too close to roads and other dangerous places.

Keeping control of the game

The aim of the play is for you and your dog to have fun together, but that doesn't mean all rules go out the window. Ground rules that you have put in place for your dog should still apply during play sessions otherwise there could be repercussions when the game is over.

To ensure that games and play are both enjoyable and beneficial to you and your dog, avoid the following:

1. Getting your dog overexcited to the point where you no longer have control
2. Playing games where you are the toy
3. Puppy games

Some games are great fun when played with puppies but become a problem when your fully-grown dog plays like this. Games played with no control, allowing the dog to behave in an unacceptable way will generally result in inappropriate behaviour at other times.

It is also worth remembering to put toys away after play sessions, so they keep their novelty value.



Other activities

There are also organised activities you can participate in with your dog for example, agility, hiking and obedience. Details of activities in your area can be found in various dog publications, local newspapers or the Internet.

For advice or ideas for your dog, call our Behaviour Advice Line on **0905 020 0222** (calls cost 25p per minute).

