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Dog Behavior and Training – Play and Exercise

Why are play and exercise important?

Play with owners and with other dogs provides your dog not only with an outlet for physical exercise, but also helps to fill your dog's social needs.

"Insufficient exercise can contribute to problem behaviors."

Insufficient exercise can contribute to problem behaviors including destructiveness (chewing and digging), investigative behavior (garbage raiding), hyperactivity, unruliness, excitability, attention-getting behaviors, and even some forms of barking. It is especially important to ensure that a dog's need for exercise and social interaction have been met prior to leaving the dog alone at home and prior to lengthy crating or confinement sessions.

What are good ways to play with and exercise my puppy or dog?

Taking your dog for a walk is good exercise and can be enjoyable and healthy for you as well. From an early age, you should accustom your puppy to a collar and leash. A flat nylon or leather collar or a leash and body harness usually works well. However, since socialization at this age is very important, ensure as much play and exercise with healthy, vaccinated dogs as possible. A puppy class might be a good place to meet and play with other puppies and their owners. Practice walking skills in your own yard first. Put your puppy on a leash and, with your voice and a small tug, or perhaps a food or toy reward as a prompt, encourage it to follow you. Reward the good behavior with praise. Keep initial walks short to encourage compliance.



For adult dogs that pull excessively, a head halter or a no-pull harness may help settle the dog and make walks more pleasant. Keep in mind that the walk does not have to be long. In fact, a short 10- to 15-minute "sniff" walk can be very enjoyable for your dog. Even on longer walks you can alternate periods of controlled walking at a heel with periods where the dog can explore and sniff the environment. Putting these sniffing and exploration times on a release command such as "OK," helps the dog to understand that the controlled walk is to be maintained until the release command is given. Dogs find the scents in the environment stimulating and interesting and a good "sniff" walk can enrich your dog's day.

Playing with your pet is an enjoyable activity for both of you. Not only does your dog get exercise, but also positive interactions take place. Training sessions can also be part of each play session so that you can gain further control, while providing social interaction between you and your pet. Many dogs also enjoy learning new tricks such as jumping through a hoop, shake, play dead and more.

How much exercise and play is appropriate?

Selecting an appropriate amount and type of play and exercise will depend on the type of dog. Puppies and adult dogs from breeds that have been bred for their stamina or are “working breeds” often have higher exercise requirements. For purebred dogs, consider their traditional purpose and the normal amount of energy that would be expended in that occupation when deciding the type and amount of play to provide. For example, the retrieving breeds do best with lengthy games of fetch or “Frisbee,” while the sledding breeds might prefer pulling carts, or running or jogging with an active owner. Terriers may prefer sniffing and catching “prey,” while herding breeds might be suited to focused training and agility.

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The length and type of play and exercise for your dog will depend on its behavioral requirements and health limitations. While some dogs may still be ready for more after a 5-mile jog and a game of fetch, others may be tired and satisfied after a short walk around the block. The idea is to enrich the quality of life for your dog and yourself, not to create a canine athlete.

How can I keep my dog occupied when I am away?

When you are out, or you are busy at home with other activities and responsibilities, it would be ideal for your dog to be relaxed and sleeping, but this will not always be the case. Try to follow a regular daily routine that includes walks, exercise, play time, feeding times, as well as some time that your dog spends on its own (e.g., playing with its own toys or napping in its bed). Object play and feeding toys can be used to help keep your dog occupied and stimulated at these times. If your dog does not receive sufficient stimulation to meet its physical and mental needs, he may choose to engage in other behaviors that may be undesirable to the owners. Exploring the environment, stealing food items, raiding garbage cans, chewing or digging, and attention seeking behaviors are just a few of the ways that dogs will find to keep themselves occupied.



When you are confident that you have provided your dog with sufficient play and interactive exercise, and you must leave your dog alone, provide sufficient toys and distractions to keep your dog occupied and confine your pet to a safe, dog-proofed area. Pets might be kept occupied and stimulated when you are not available to supervise with chew toys, many of which can aid dental health. These products might either be edible such as rawhide, pig ears, hooves, or dental treats, or inedible toys made from rubber, rope or nylon. There are also a wide variety of manipulation toys that can be stuffed with food or treats. Some release food during chewing; some dispense food when rolled along the floor; others can be stuffed or coated with dog food, cheese, liver, or peanut butter. Dogs that are housed outdoors might prefer an opportunity to dig. Some dogs enjoy watching pet videos and some do best when housed with another dog for play and companionship, although this can result in rowdy activity in your absence.

It may also help to keep the dog away from windows where the dog might engage in territorial displays as people and cars pass by the house. Dogs should not be left outside while you are not home. Not only is your dog subjected to the elements (heat, cold, rain, snow) but there is also a risk that your dog could escape and be lost or injured. In addition they may engage in inappropriate barking and territorial behaviors that have the potential to develop into problem behavior without the benefit of owner direction and control.

What type of games can I play with my dog?

Playing with your dog not only provides an opportunity for exercise and positive social interactions, but it can also be a fun way to train. Each time you give your dog a treat or toy, or each time he fetches and retrieves, you can practice a training command such as “come,” “sit,” “fetch,” “get it,” “drop it,” or “stay.” A variety of types of interactive toys are available for throwing, retrieving and kicking, such as flying disks, balls and rubber hockey pucks. These types of toys are generally not designed to be chew toys, but they are used for games of fetch, teaching retrieval skills, and as training rewards.

What other games can I play with my dog?

1. Hide and seek, where one family member goes off and hides and the puppy is then called to “come” and gets a treat and praise when he finds the person.
2. Search games where you set out small bags, boxes or bowls with a favored treat or favored toy inside and have your dog search for these.
3. Follow the leader where you step away from your puppy and call him to “come” to get a treat. Then run away and say “come” and reward with a treat before running off again.
4. “Drop” or “give” which is an exercise that helps to teach your puppy to give up toys for something even more valuable. Giving your puppy a toy and then offering it something even more appealing might do this. Use the word “give” or “drop” and have your puppy drop the toy in your hand; then trade for the other toy or treat. This can also be practiced during tug and fetch games in which case you can give a treat or return to the tug and fetch games as a reward.
5. “Get it” where you teach your puppy to pick up items off the floor by tossing very small treats and saying “get it.”

Continue this training by tossing small treats in different directions. Next, toss a favored play toy and when the puppy picks it up give a treat.

What type of play should be avoided?

Try to avoid games that pit your strength against your puppy or dog. Tug games seem to be an enjoyable diversion for many puppies and dogs and they do help to direct chewing and biting toward an acceptable play object, rather than an owner’s hands or clothing.

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On the other hand, some pets get very excited, overly stimulated and begin to grab the owners or their clothing during the game. At this point the game must immediately cease and only resume if the dog can learn to keep its mouth on the toy. In addition, don’t allow your puppy to demand or initiate tug games since this could escalate to pulling on you or your clothing or stealing towels or clothing items to try and get you to play. You should always schedule and initiate these games. Teaching the dog to “drop” on command before beginning the tug games can help to ensure that you remain in control of object play sessions such as fetch and tug. Tug toys may be made of rope, nylon, or fleece. One particular product the tug-a-jug delivers small treats each time the toy is tugged so that the dog learns to stop and grab the treats before playing again. This same technique can be used by owners to teach their dogs to stop or drop. Simply drop a treat or two on the floor while playing tug and say drop as the dog leaves to get the treat. Then have the dog sit calmly before

resuming the tug game. Once you have a dog that will play tug without biting of hands or clothing and shows no possessive aggression with respect to the toy, you might be able to proceed to supervised tug games with children. If teeth come in contact with hands, if aggression escalates beyond play, or the dog is unwilling to give up the tug toy, the game must end immediately.

Although games like chase are good exercise, they can often result in wild exuberant play that gets out of control. Similarly games of fetch can be both a great game and learning experience, but only if your dog learns to bring back and drop the toy so that the game can continue. Again, a good rule of thumb is to only play these games if you are the one to initiate the game, and are capable of stopping the game immediately should it get out of control. If you find that your dog gets too excited, begins to nip or won't settle down while playing certain games, then you should first practice your sit, down and go to your mat training exercises. You can then use these exercises to settle the dog during or at the end of each game.



How can I teach my puppy to play fetch?

Most young puppies, even those that do not have an inherent instinct to retrieve, can be taught how to play fetch from an early age. You will need to train your puppy to do three things; go get the toy, bring it back, and relinquish it to you so that you can throw it again. First, make the toy enticing. Try a squeaky toy or a ball. Get your puppy's attention, toss the toy a short distance, 1 to 2 feet, and encourage your puppy to go to it. When it gets there give it praise. If your puppy picks up the toy in its mouth, say "good dog." Then move backward a short distance, clap your hands and entice your puppy to come toward you. All the while you should be encouraging verbally with a happy tone of voice and lots of praise. When your puppy returns to you, say "give it" or "release" and show another toy or even a small food treat. Most puppies will gladly give the toy to get the new toy or treat and at the same time will quickly learn the "give" or "release" command. As you repeat the entire sequence of events several times, the game of fetch itself should soon become enough of a reward that food and toys will no longer be necessary to entice the puppy to give the toy. At the end of each fetch play session, have the puppy return the toy and give another toy or chew treat for the puppy to play with as a final reward for releasing the toy.

For older dogs that like to play their own version of fetch, which is get the toy but not return it, playing fetch using two toys can often keep the game going. Throw one toy and as the dog returns to you, show him the other toy while saying, "drop it." Most dogs will drop the toy they have to get the one you have, at which point you can praise the dog and throw the other toy. Over time, many dogs will learn the "drop it" command and the need for two toys may diminish.

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Sometimes when there is more than one dog in the home, playing games such as fetch creates problems when both dogs rush toward the object. This can be avoided either by playing with one dog at a time or by throwing two objects in opposite directions.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by: Debra Horwitz, DVM, DACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, DACVB, DECAWBM
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