



It's Play time!

Most owners don't play with their dogs enough. Play is an extremely important learning zone for puppies and dogs – they learn about bite inhibition, self-control, calculating risk and finding out what they are capable of physically. It also helps to create a great bond between owner and dog – those that play together, stay together! You will also find that your dog will respond better to training, and recall better on walks if he sees you as a fun person to be with. He'll also be more stimulated mentally, will sleep better and be more willing to settle quietly when you have had a hard day.

It's definitely time to play!!

It can be hard though to know what to do and how to do it – here are a few ideas to get you started....

1. Chase the Snake!

Dogs and puppies all have some level of inbuilt prey drive – it's much more pronounced in terriers and dogs trained to find, flush out or actually kill small animals but nearly all dogs love a game of 'catch the snake'. Luckily you don't need an actual snake, just a long flexible item (e.g. soft toys/ fleecy tugs, lengths of rope) that will wriggle and dance when you shake it. Get down on your hands and knees, and entice your dog over to you by wriggling the toy along the floor – change the speed and direction, throw it, hide it behind your back, tie it to a piece of string and run all over the house – he should be desperate to get it and when he does, let him have a good tuggy game with it before starting again.

2. Sniff out the treats

All dogs have a great sense of smell, love to sniff and most of them can't resist a tasty snack. Sprinkle treats on the floor and tell your dog to 'find the sweetsies!'. Pretty simple. Then try putting the treats somewhere just out of sight but in the same area. You could fill a box with scrunched up paper and sprinkle the treats in there, or put some in a bun tray and cover the holes with tennis balls so he has to nudge the balls off to find the sweetsies. Fill a toilet roll tube with treats and cover the ends so he has to work out how to get the treats out. If he gets really good, go into a different room with your dog and hide treats under cushions, in corners, on tables and then release him to find them – hours of sniffy fun! Just remember how many you put out so you know when he's found them all!

3. Staircase Dash

If you have a staircase, make it a game to run up it and burn some serious energy. To get the most exercise from this game with the least risk to your dog's joints, start at the bottom of the stairs. Put your dog in a sit-stay and throw the toy up to the top landing. Make it more exciting by holding your dog at the bottom while creating a build up, such as saying "Reeedy.... ready..... GO!" and let your dog dash up the stairs as fast as he can to retrieve the toy. Let your dog come back down the stairs at his own pace, encouraging a slower return since it's the downhill climb that risks injury. After 10 or so repetitions of this, most dogs will be totally worn out.

NOTE: This is only for dogs who are more than 1-year-old, or after their joints have finished developing. You can cause long-term injury playing this game with younger dogs as their joints aren't developed enough to take the impact.

4. Tag You're It & Hide and Seek

This game encourages both a lightning fast recall, since it makes coming when called a really fun game. Find a friend or family member to help (children love this one). Each of you gets a pocket full of treats. Start across the room from one another. One person calls the dog and rewards him with a treat, then the next person calls and rewards. Gradually increase the distance so that soon you're calling from different rooms, and then from all the way across the house or garden. The more your dog runs around the house, the better! You can increase the excitement your dog feels playing this game by calling to him and then starting to run away, so your recall is also a game of chase. While you're playing you can also teach your dog the name of the person playing with you – when the dog is with you, say 'go find daddy! (or whoever!)' as the other person calls them – they will soon learn to associate name and person and then you can up the game to 'hide and seek'. The other person hides and the dog has to 'go find daddy!'. This can be quite useful too – tuck a message into your dog's collar and let your partner know what time dinners will be ready by dog-delivery!

Other ideas: Make an obstacle course; teach a new trick such as shaking hands, rolling over, weaving through your legs; have a big game of tug, fetch or football; teach your dog to stand on a wobbly object (not too high!) or to get in a box and 'hide'. Look on YouTube for loads of other tricks and games to play

Top Tips for playing:

- Keep some 'special' toys out of your dog's reach unless you are actually playing with them with the dog – this massively increases the value of the toy and means your dog will be a lot more excited to play with you than if you picked something out of his normal 'boring' toys
- Keep play sessions short! A few minutes a few times a day will keep him interested. Always leave the dog wanting more – if he wanders off you've overdone it. Put the toy away, give him a treat and let him do his own thing so you can do yours
- Mix it up – don't always play in the same room or at the same time. Produce a special toy on a walk and your dog will think it's Christmas! Surprise him – he will love you for it and be far more likely to respond if you call him in case its play time 😊
- Be inventive – think about what your dog was bred to do – can you find a game that uses his natural instincts? Got a Staffy – get some really good tuggy toys – it's fine to let him win! Border Collie? Teach him the names of your kids and get her to round them up at meal times. Or try teaching your dog to do something unusual – riding on a skateboard or to catch a frisbee.
- Incorporate play into your training - use it as a reward for getting things right and for ending a training session. You don't always need to use food to reward.
- Most of all Have Fun!!! It will definitely make you smile and will brighten the dullest rainy day – but don't ever force your dog to play – it needs to be fun for both of you!