

Play and Exercise in Dogs



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WHY ARE PLAY AND EXERCISE IMPORTANT?

Play with owners and with other friendly dogs not only provides a dog with some of its exercise requirements, but also helps to meet social needs. Insufficient exercise and social attention can contribute to problem behaviors including chewing, digging, garbage raiding, hyperactivity, excitability, attention-getting behaviors, and even some forms of barking. It is especially important to ensure that a dog's need for exercise has 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?

Playing with your pet is an enjoyable activity for both of you. Not only does the puppy get exercise, but positive interactions also take place. Training sessions teaching obedience or tricks are also an excellent way to gain leadership and control, while providing interaction between you and your pet.

Taking your dog for a walk is a good basic way to accomplish a limited amount of exercise. Do acclimate your puppy early on (as early as 8 weeks) to a flat nylon or leather buckle collar and a lightweight leash. Practice your walking skills in your own yard first. Put your puppy on leash, and with your voice and some food treats, or perhaps a toy reward as a lure, encourage it to follow you. Reward the puppy for following you with warm praise and food treats. Keep initial walks short to encourage compliance. This method works well with older dogs that are hesitant about walking on a leash. Do keep your puppy away from stray dogs and "dog heavy" neighborhood parks until all vaccinations are finished (just remember that your puppy needs a lot of socialization no matter how young he is so, take him to safe areas to socialize). Remember that giving your dog walks only will not fulfill a puppy's nor an adult dog's daily exercise and play requirements.

An easy way to tire your dog or puppy out is to find a friendly, well-vaccinated group of dogs to play with. Every dog needs to have some weekly playtime with other canines so they remain friendly to their own species. A good way to find this safe play environment is to enroll your puppy or dog in a training class that provides supervised play for its enrollees. Or you might consider taking your dog to a "doggie day care" center once or twice weekly. To learn more about Doggie Day Care at the Animal Community Center, visit: www.hssv.org/daycare.html.

HOW MUCH EXERCISE AND PLAY IS APPROPRIATE?

Selecting an appropriate amount and type of play and exercise will depend on the type and age of your dog. Puppies and even adult dogs from breeds that have been bred for their stamina or to do "work" often have higher exercise requirements. For purebred dogs, consider their traditional work when deciding the type and amount of play to provide. For example, retrieving breeds do best with lengthy games of fetch or swimming while sledding breeds might prefer pulling carts or jogging with an active owner. While some adult 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.

One thing is certain; each animal, young or old, should have at least two daily exercise sessions per day; ranging from 15 minutes for a puppy or senior citizen, up to 60 minutes for a healthy adult dog. As a general rule of thumb, any dog under one year of age should not be asked to do rigorous heavy exercise, such as jogging, as it may cause skeletal problems since your dog is still growing. Please consult your veterinarian before you begin a rigorous exercise program for any dog under 16 months of age or an "out of shape" adult.

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. Exploring the environment, stealing food items, raiding garbage cans, chewing or digging, are just a few of the ways that dogs will find to keep themselves occupied.

If you must leave your dog alone, first provide plenty of exercise so your pet is tired and more likely to sleep. Next, make sure to confine your pet to a safe, dog-proofed indoor area or a crate placed in the most used room in your household. Dogs left outdoors for long periods often develop destructive habits or bark so much the neighbors complain.

Lastly, before leaving your dog alone, provide sufficient toys and distractions to keep your dog occupied. Stuffed Kongs are a great choice. Provide several Kongs, laced with wet dog food, cheese, hot dogs, or bits of chicken, steak or fish. These will give your dog something to do other than bark, chew the wrong items or try to escape. Self-feeding toys such as Buster Cubes or Activity Balls are also good choices. Instead of feeding your dog from a bowl, pour his daily ration into the Buster Cube or Activity Ball and let him earn his meal.

Whatever your dog prefers, give it to him just before you leave and when you return, take the items away. This keeps the home-alone items interesting and stimulating.

WHAT TYPE OF PLAY SHOULD BE AVOIDED?

Avoid games that pit your strength against your puppy. Tug-of-war games seem to be an enjoyable diversion for many puppies and they do help to direct chewing and biting toward an acceptable play object, rather than an owner's hands or clothing. On the other hand, some puppies get very excited, overly stimulated and become far too aggressive during tug-of-war games. (Any family that has children less than 12 years of age should NOT be playing any rough, tug of war or wrestling games with the dog.) A general rule of thumb for tug-of-war (or any other game for that matter) is to avoid it, unless you are the one to initiate the game, and can stop it as soon as the need arises. Teaching the dog to "drop" on command can help to ensure that you remain in control of object play sessions such as fetch and tug-of-war.

Although games like chase are good exercise, they can often result in wild exuberant play that gets out of control. 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. Many dogs can be taught to play "hide and seek" without becoming too excited (the human hides with a treat or a toy to reward the dog for finding them). Other dogs like to "search" for their toys or treats.

It is important that if you have young children (12 years and under) in your family that all interaction including games, be supervised 100% of the time by a watchful adult. There are also many kinds of dog sports that you and your pet can become involved with including agility, flyball, weight pulling, obedience, Frisbee contests and much more. For further information on these activities, please visit www.hssv.org/training for a complete description of our rewards-based, force-free training classes and dog sports classes, seminars and workshops.

HOW CAN I TEACH MY PUPPY OR ADULT DOG TO PLAY FETCH?

Most dogs, puppies and adults, even those that do not have an inherent instinct to retrieve, can be taught how to play fetch from any age. You will need to train your dog to do four things; hold the toy in his mouth, go get the toy, bring it back, and drop it so that you can throw it again. First, make the toy enticing. Try a squeaky toy or a ball. Try to start with something your dog already has an interest in. Let the dog take it in its mouth. Praise and pet the dog as it is holding the toy. Don't try to take it away immediately but make a big fuss out of him just holding the toy. When your dog is consistently holding the toy for several seconds, then say, "drop it" or "give it" and immediately show your dog another *identical* toy or a small food treat. Most dogs will gladly give the toy to get the new toy or treat and at the same time will quickly learn the "drop" or "give" command.

When your dog is consistently holding and then dropping the toy on command, then try tossing the toy a short distance, 1-2 feet, and encourage your dog chase after it. When he gets there, praise him. If he picks it up in his mouth, tell him "GREAT dog". Then, move backwards a very short way (1-2 feet), clap your hands and entice your dog to come towards you. All the while you should be encouraging verbally with a happy tone of voice and lots of praise.

When your dog returns to you, say, "drop it" or "give it" and immediately show the other toy or small food treat. Then, by repeating the entire sequence of events again, the game of fetch itself should soon be enough of a reward that food and toys will no longer be necessary to entice the dog to give the toy. At the end of each fetch play session, have the dog return the toy and give a toy or chew treat for the dog to play with as a final reward for releasing the toy. Start with very short fetch training sessions at first (1-4 minutes) but do several in one day and always end when your dog wants more!

WHAT ABOUT PLAY DOG PARKS?

Please keep in mind that dogs under five months of age should be enrolled in a basic training and socialization course **before** being allowed to play in dog parks. This for their health and safety!

If your dog is a bully or has aggression problems (to people or to other dogs) then the dog park IS NOT a place for him to play. Consult a local humane dog trainer if you are having problems with your pooch before taking him for a group romp. Or, apply for membership at HSSV's Private Dog Park where all doggie members are health and behaviorally screened; learn more at www.hssv.org/dogpark.

BASIC DOG PARK ETIQUETTE

- The dog park is not a place that you can just drop Rover off and leave. You are responsible for him just like a child at a public play area. Watch carefully and at first sign of trouble, intervene.
- Any child under 15 years of age should be accompanied by an adult when in the dog park.
- Pick up any solid elimination immediately.
- Practice calling your dog to you often and rewarding him with food treats.
- Do not bring your dog's favorite toy to the park unless he is good at sharing with others.
- Watch for signs of trouble (via body language), stiff walk, stiff high tail that is wagging slowly, hackles up, growling, showing of teeth (snarling). At the first sign of trouble, call your dog away in a happy tone of voice.
- You are liable for any damages your dog may do to another. If your dog seems to get in more and more scuffles, consider altering (spaying or neutering) AND getting professional help.
- If a fight breaks out, try dousing with water, pulling up and back on hind legs (as someone is doing the same to the other dog), putting a piece of cardboard between the dogs, throwing a blanket or coat over them. Do not attempt to reach in between the dogs as you could be bitten and seriously hurt. Keep the dogs separated until cooled off or better yet, go on home. The aggressor should have a professional consultation with a humane trainer and the victim may need professional help in now overcoming a fear of dogs!

RECOMMENDED READING

- **Play with Your Dog** – Pat Miller, 2008
- **Play Together, Stay Together – Happy and Healthy Play Between People and Dogs** – Patricia McConnell & Karen London, 2008
- **Visiting the Dog Park – Having Fun, Staying Safe** Cheryl Smith, 2007
- **Canine Adventure: Fun Things To Do With Your Dog** - Cynthia Miller, 1998
- **Hiking With Your Dog** - Gary Hoffman, 1997
- **Take A Bow Wow!** - Fun and Functional Dog Tricks (video), Broitman & Lippman, 1996