

Brain Games - Enrichment Games for Dogs

Training Goals: To Provide Your Dog with Forms of Enrichment

Dogs undergoing treatment (i.e. heartworm or post-op fracture repair) have strict exercise restrictions to ensure that there are no health complications. Achieving a balance between physical exercise restrictions and the dog's needs for social interaction, as well as managing energy levels, can be tricky, but there are a number of quiet games and training exercises that can go a long way towards alleviating boredom in a dog going through recovery. There's a saying in the training world that goes something like this: "Twenty minutes of fun training can tire a dog out more effectively and proactively than two hours of off-leash running." Setting aside 10-20 minutes a day to teach your dog fun and mentally stimulating games not only strengthens the bond between you, but also goes a long way toward ensuring they are happy, fulfilled and well-behaved.



Fun and easy exercise options

Mealtime puzzles

Puzzle feeders can make meal time fun and provide your dog with a good mental workout while they forage for their food. Meal Time Puzzle Feeders can range in difficulty from simple maze-type feeders to balls with holes pre-cut in them that only dispense kibble when the dog rolls them with their nose.

There are even fun DIY choices – you can spread kibble around the depressions in a muffin tin turned upside down, or put it right side up and hide kibble underneath tennis balls placed in the cups. If you want to take it a step further, you can hide kibble in a cardboard box filled with crumpled up newspaper – dogs love this one, guaranteed – although you do have to pick up the shredded paper afterwards. Or, you can hide kibble in a snuffle mat.

Scavenger hunt

On nice days, you can create a kibble scavenger hunt in your back yard or in a room in your house, and teach the dog to use their nose to sniff out the trail of kibble. To prevent the dog from running around the yard searching for kibble, place a harness and long leash on them and cue them to search while you allow them to lead you from hiding place to hiding place so you can control the pace. Bonus: you are now teaching your dog the beginning elements of tracking!

Easy stationary or low movement tricks

Trick training is a great way to bond with your dog, engage their busy brain and show off to your friends and family all the cute things they can do. As a bonus, asking dogs to perform known tricks in a veterinary office waiting room can help build confidence and ease their stress; you can even employ some of these cute moves into cooperative care behaviours that the dog feels comfortable offering on cue during the vet examinations and procedures themselves. Here are some fun and easy tricks:



Nose touch

Hold a treat between your fingers, show it to your dog and cue “touch.” When your dog’s nose touches your hand, click or say “yes” and let them have the treat. Once they get the hang of it, remove the treat from your hand, cue touch, wait for them to touch your hand with their nose, click or say “yes” and give them a treat from your other hand. This trick can also be used as a handy redirection cue when your pup is overexcited or not paying attention.

Chin rest

Holding your left-hand palm up slightly below your dog’s chin, use a treat to lure their chin down to touch your palm-up hand. When their chin touches your hand, click or say “yes” and give them the treat while their chin is still in your hand. After they are able to do this 4 out of 5 times minimum, say “chin” first, then lure again. After practising for a while, your dog will be able to put their chin in your hand without the lure and on the verbal cue.

Wipe your paws

Show your dog a treat and put it underneath a towel on the floor. Your dog will want to try to get the treat with their mouth but hold the towel firmly so they can’t get it and wait for them to paw at it. When the dog paws, say “yes” or click, and give them a treat. After they start automatically pawing at the towel, cue “wipe your paws” right before they start and reward them with a “yes” or click and treat. Eventually, you can remove the treat from under the towel and ask the dog to do it on cue.

Paw target

This follows the same principle as the wipe your paws trick above. This time, put a treat under a Tupperware lid and place it close to your dog’s foot. Again, wait for them to paw at the lid, then click or say “yes” and treat as they do it. Do this a number of times putting the lid in the same place, and when the dog automatically touches the lid with their paw, you are ready to add your cue which you say right before they paw. I like to use a specific cue for each foot (I will teach just one foot first but may want to teach the trick with individual feet). My cue for right front paw is “foot”. When the dog is targeting the lid with their foot easily at the distance you have originally set, you can move the lid around, asking them to target it in the new position.

Cross your paws

This builds on the paw target game. When the dog is good at targeting from an easy distance, ask them to go into a down stay, and put the Tupperware lid beside the opposite paw that you wish them to target with. The dog will cross their paw over the other to target the lid.

For more detailed instructions to teach some fun stationary tricks, check out Kyra Sundance’s tricks training book “Ten Minute Dog Training Games,” available through the Toronto Public Library, or through Sundance’s website <http://www.domorewithyourdog.com/>. Please remember to only attempt tricks that will not overexert your dog while they are undergoing treatment/recovery!



Basic obedience training in the home

Did you know that most obedience training starts in a low-distraction environment, like teaching the foundations of obedience in the house so that the dog can focus on the skills being learned before we introduce them to all the distractions outdoors? While your dog is on restricted exercise, you can help them get a solid grasp of basic obedience behaviors that will make your outings that much more fun once their treatment is complete. Here are some basic obedience cues to master in the home:

Heel

Starting in the house when it is quiet, call your dog to your side. When they are positioned with their head at your knee beside you, say “yes” or click and give them a treat. Take a step forward and reward the dog frequently while they stay in the “heel” position. You may need to reset them and it’s okay to lure them to the position you want with a treat. Once the dog understands that walking beside you gets them a treat, add the cue “heel” and continue to reward them for walking beside you. The dog may only do it for one step or two steps initially, but patiently ask them to heel for a longer and longer duration, taking frequent breaks in the training session. Setting this up indoors and starting the exercise with the dog between you and a wall makes it easier for them to remain in place and learn that heeling is rewarded.

Sit

With the dog standing facing you, show them a treat in your hand and move your hand in front of their nose upwards. The dog’s nose will follow the treat up and their behind will automatically sit. When they are doing this easily with a treat in hand, add the cue “sit” and remove the treat from your hand, still using the upwards luring motion. When the dog sits, say “yes” or click and give them the treat.

Lie down

Once your dog has mastered a sit, you can proceed to teaching “lie down.” From a sit position, hold a treat close to their nose and move it downward. The dog’s head will follow the treat down and when they can’t lower their head any further, they will lie down to get the treat. If the dog is having trouble with this, you can hold the treat close to their nose, move your hand down to the floor with their head following the treat, then draw your hand slightly away from the dog (moving parallel to the floor), luring them to stretch out and lie down. When the dog is doing this easily, add the cue “Lie down” and lure them with a couple of treats again using the cue; then move to an empty hand lure and a click or “yes” and treat once they’re down. Some dogs find this hard to do, so if you or they are getting frustrated, don’t fret, you can also capture down positions whenever you see them lying down on their own randomly throughout the day. If the dog is lying down, click or say “yes,” with the cue “good lie down” and give them a treat. They will learn that “lie down” is the word for being in a down position and that it gets them a treat when they do it.

Stay

Ask your dog to sit or lie down. Staying close to the dog at first, cue “stay,” count “one-thousand-and-one” in your head, and give them a treat. Release them from the stay with a cue such as “okay” or “free.” Practice this for very short intervals initially, and then gradually change the duration of the stay (still staying close to the dog), adding a second or two. Mix up your stay duration time, sometimes make it very short, sometimes longer, then back to short. Remember to always give the dog a reward while they are still in their stay. When the dog gets good at this, you can start taking a step away from them, then returning to reward them in the stay position, eventually moving farther and farther away.



Nose work games

A dog's nose (or "sniffer" as we trainers like to call it) is a highly developed sense organ. Many owners choose nose work training for enrichment for senior dogs, reactive dogs or dogs recovering from injury because it's an independent dog/handler sport that is not physically exerting but that wonderfully stimulates the dog's brain. Here are some beginner games you can play with your dog:

- Which hand holds the cookie
- Find the hidden cookie in the house
- Pick the cup that holds the cookie

Show your dog the treat first, and begin by making your hiding places easy, then gradually increase the difficulty of the hide. Remember that if your dog is being treated for heartworm, important that their heart rate not increase. Any find-it games should be done on leash to ensure they are moving slowly.

Cognition games

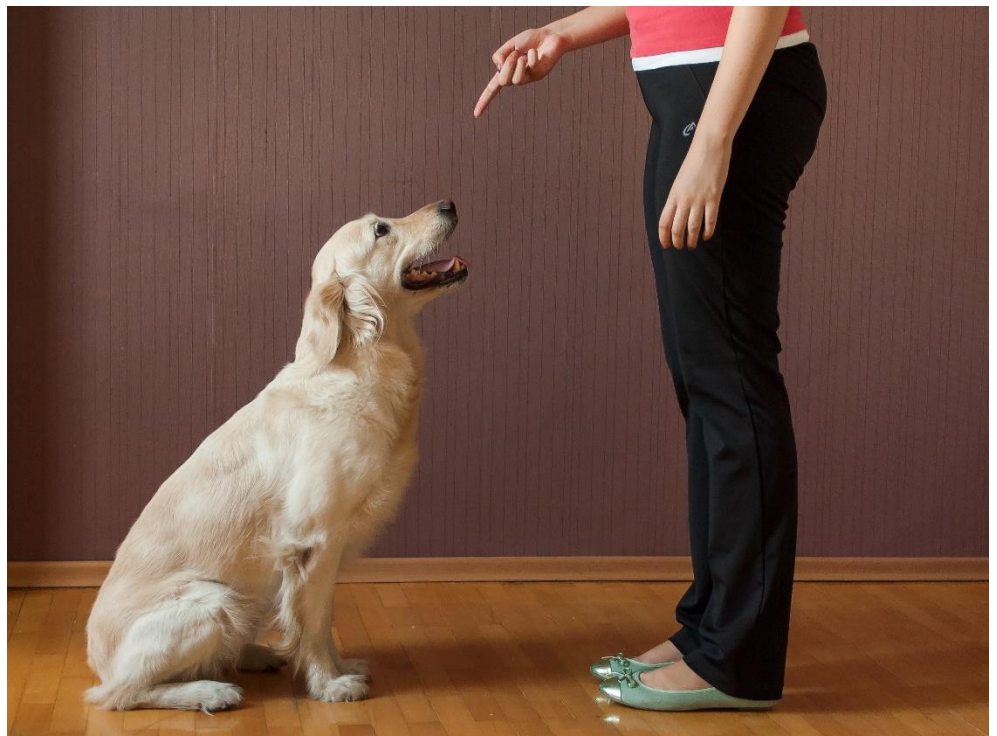
Dogs love to use their nose and the olfactory system! Dr. Brian Hare, an Edinburgh-based vet, created a project called Dognition (dognition.com) that both tests and measures the way dogs problem solve, learn and think and provides mentally stimulating challenges for dogs to problem solve. Here are a couple of fun video examples of how to teach your dog problem-solving skills:

- a. Memory vs Smell: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=toJZMfnc8ig>
- b. Pointing vs Memory: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nYmRjUZG554>

Relaxation exercises

At the end of this document, you will find Dr. Karen Overall's Protocol for Relaxation, which teaches dogs to sit and stay on a mat while relaxing under various levels of distraction. This is an excellent 15-day training protocol that you can begin doing as soon as your dog comes home to set the stage for a very strong cued relaxation on a mat behaviour.

Enjoy these fun games with your dog; remember, please ask your veterinarian about your dog's specific exercise restrictions before engaging in training sessions to ensure that the behaviours you are going to teach are appropriate to their specific recovery needs.



Protocol for Relaxation

By Dr. Karen L. Overall

Clinical Behavioral Medicine for Small Animals, 1997.

This program is the foundation for all other behavior modification programs. Its purpose is to teach the dog to sit and stay while relaxing in a variety of circumstances. The circumstances change from very reassuring ones with you present to potentially more stressful ones when you are absent. The purpose of the program is not to teach the dog to sit; sitting (or lying down, if the dog is more comfortable) is only a tool. The goals of the program are to teach the dog to relax, to defer to you, to enjoy earning a salary for an appropriate, desirable behavior, and to develop, as a foundation, a pattern of behaviors that allow the dog to cooperate with future behavior modification (generally desensitization and counter-conditioning). This protocol acts as a foundation for teaching the dog context-specific appropriate behavior. The focus is to teach the dog to rely on you for all the cues as to the appropriateness of its behavior so that it can then learn not to react inappropriately.

About food treats

This program uses food treats. Please read the logic behind this approach in the "Protocol for Deference: Basic Program." Remember, the treats are used as a salary or reward -- not as a bribe. If you bribe a problem dog, you are defeated before you start. It is often difficult to work with a problem dog that has learned to manipulate bribes, but there are creative ways -- often involving the use of head collars -- to correct this situation. First, find a food that the dog likes and that it does not usually experience. Suggestions include boiled, slivered chicken or tiny pieces of cheese. Boiled, shredded chicken can be frozen in small portions and defrosted as needed. Individually wrapped slices of cheese can be divided into tiny pieces suitable for behavior modification while still wrapped in plastic, minimizing waste and mess. Consider the following guidelines in choosing a food reward:

1. Foods that are high in protein may help induce changes in brain chemistry that help the dog relax.
2. Some dogs do not do well with treats that contain artificial colors or preservatives.
3. Dogs with food allergies or those taking monoamine oxidase inhibitor (MAOI) drugs may have food restrictions (cheese, for dogs taking MAOIs [deprenyl]).
4. Dog biscuits generally are not sufficient motivation, but some foods are so desirable that the dog is too stimulated by them to relax -- something between these two extremes is preferred.
5. Treats should be tiny (less than half the size of a thumbnail) so that the dog does not get full, fat, or bored.
6. If the dog stops responding for one kind of treat, try another.
7. Do not let treats make up the bulk of the dog's diet; the dog needs its normal, well-balanced ration.

The reward process

Rewarding dogs with food treats is an art. Learning to do so correctly helps the dog focus on the exercises and keeps everyone safe. To prevent the dog from lunging for the food, keep the already prepared treats in a little cup or plastic bag behind your back and keep one treat in the hand used to reward the dog. That hand can then either be kept behind your back so that the dog does not stare at the food or can be moved to your eye so that you can teach the dog to look happy and make eye contact with you. The food treat must be small so that the focus of the dog's attention is not a slab of food but rather your cues. A treat of the correct size can be closed in the palm of the hand by folding the fingers and will not be apparent when held between the thumb



and forefingers. When presenting the dog with the treat, bring the hand, with a lightly closed fist, up quickly to the dog (do not startle the dog) and turn your wrist to open your hand.

When starting the program, let the dog smell and taste the reward so that it knows the anticipated reward for the work. If the dog is too terrified to approach, you can place a small amount of the treat on the floor. Then ask the dog to "sit"; if the dog sits instantly, say "Good girl (boy)!" and instantly open your hand to give the dog the treat instantly while saying "stay."

Do not wave your hands or the treat around in front of the dog. This acts as a distraction and confuses the dog. Part of the point of this program is to make the dog calmer and less confused. Excitable behavior on your part or unclear signals can make your dog more anxious. This does not help. It is important to be calm. Your dog will make mistakes. This does not reflect on you. Problem dogs and new puppies require a lot of patience. The people who have had the most success with these protocols have been those who work the hardest and most consistently.

The Relaxation Protocol

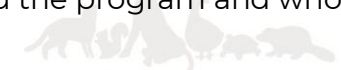
The program was designed so that your dog could learn without becoming stressed and without learning to ignore the tasks because they were too predictable. The protocol intersperses long activities with short ones. You may have to adjust some activities to your particular needs. The pattern is actually spelled out in the program. It is preferable to reward the dog only for performing each task perfectly. If this is not possible for your dog, you can use a "shaping" procedure in which you first reward the dog for a behavior that approaches that indicated in the task. The next time you do the task, the behavior must be closer to perfect to be rewarded. If the program is done correctly, your dog will perform the task perfectly within a short time.

The protocol is a foundation for desensitizing and counter-conditioning your dog to situations in which it reacts inappropriately. The pages can be used as one day's tasks, or you may proceed at the dog's pace (which may be faster or slower). Some exercises are weird (asking you to run in circles or talk to people who do not exist), but these can be very helpful in getting dogs to learn to relax in a variety of circumstances. Before you start the actual exercises, you must practice with the dog so that it can sit perfectly for 15 seconds without moving. Do this with food treats as described previously. Once your dog can sit this way and look happy and as if it worshipped the ground you walk on, you are ready for the more challenging stuff.

Remember that the keys to success are consistency and appropriate rewards. This means that, although we want you to work 15 to 20 minutes once or twice per day, you should work only for as long as both you and the dog are enjoying and benefiting from the program. If this means that you use six 5-minute intervals to accomplish three or four of the tasks that is fine. Please do not end on a bad note. If the dog's behavior is deteriorating or its attention is dissipating, do one final, fun, easy exercise and stop. By pushing the dog past its limits, you induce anxiety, and the dog backslides.

When the dog is able to perform all of the tasks and exercises both on- and off-lead in one location (the living room), repeat them all in other rooms and circumstances (the backyard or the park-use a lead here). When the dog performs all the tasks perfectly in all places with all household members, you are ready for Tier 2 of the protocols, which focuses on your dog's specific problems.

If at any point you cannot get past one task, try breaking that task into two or three component parts. If this still does not help, call the veterinarian who recommended the program and who is



working with the dog's behavior problems. He or she will be able to help you determine the root of the problem. Please do not just continue accepting suboptimal responses. The goal is to improve your dog's behavior.

Videotaping while you work with the dog can help. Not only can you show the veterinarian what you are doing, but also you can be a more objective critic of your approach if you are not also an active participant.

Finally, remember that the dog will give you lots of cues about how it feels. We are rewarding the physical changes associated with relaxation and happiness and so will also reward the underlying physiological states associated with this (parasympathetic part of the autonomic nervous system). This means that if the dog is relaxed, its body is not stiff, the jaws hang relaxed and are not tense, the ears are alert or cocked but not rigid, its head is held gently at an angle, and the eyes are calm and adoring, you will be rewarding the nervous system responses that help your dog learn. If you mistakenly reward fear, tension, aggression, or avoidance, you will not make as much progress. If it is easier for you and the dog to be relaxed if the dog is lying down, do that.

Good luck, and do not get discouraged. Many dogs go through a period of 3 to 7 days when their behavior gets worse before it improves. For the first time in their life the dogs have a rule structure they must follow, and they get frustrated while learning it. As they discover they are rewarded for being relaxed and happy, their behavior will improve. These programs are more difficult for the people, in many ways, than they are for the dogs. Stick with it!

Relaxation Protocol task sheets

The task is listed on the left. To the right is a space for your comments about the degree of difficulty of the task for the dog, how many times it had to be repeated, or other questionable behaviors that appeared during the task. You should discuss these with your veterinarian at the re-examination appointment.

Remember after each task to verbally praise the dog and reward it with a treat for perfect performance before going on to the next task. Each set of exercises is designed for a day or a block of time. Warm-up and cool-down periods are provided.

At the first sign of any anxiety /lips retracted, pupils dilated, head lowered, ears pulled down and back, trembling, scanning/, return to an exercise with which the dog is more comfortable or break down the exercise that produced these behaviors into smaller steps. Access the Protocol Task List

[here](#).

