



If You Don't Use It, You Loose It

My Nan has always believed in this saying. I do too but not just in humans but dogs as well. So often we think dogs need a 'good run' or 'need to go for a walk' but I rarely hear anyone say they need to give their dogs something to do or they've prepared a puzzle for their dog to work on.

Mental stimulation is really important in keeping your dog healthy. They do need physical exercise but I often feel we give too much physical exercise and not enough mental. I always have to ask the question to those who walk the socks off their dogs 'fit for what purpose?' You may get home after a really long walk and wonder why your dog is still raring to go but all you want to do is crash on the sofa. Physical exercise realises endorphins (happy hormones) and after each session your dog becomes fitter and of course more awake – not more tired! A dog with a lack of mental stimulation in his life will find other ways to entertain himself for example digging in the garden, chewing shoes, seeing people off from their front room windows of the house. The list could be endless. Lets turn this into human terms and list all the things you like to do in life. Maybe you like to read, go to the cinema, meet up with friends, go shopping etc. I'm going to stop you from doing all that because all you are allowed to do is eat sleep and go for a run...after a ball! How boring is that?

When a dog's life is boring their behaviour can change and either become a problem to us or they end up shutting down. Two areas I often get calls about. For us to have a content dog we not only need to meet their physical needs but also their mental needs as well. The really wonderful thing about this is you don't have to actually do that much to offer fun, puzzles, and things to do for your pooch. It can also be at home and whilst out and about.



Memory and learning abilities can decline with age and dogs have been known to develop Alzheimer's. The good news is brain games can help reduce some age-related brain changes.

So how many of you just 'walk' your dog? They may get a small opportunity to sniff, you may throw a ball for them or maybe they just run off 'entertaining themselves'. Maybe you are unsure how you can interact with your dog when out or you haven't got time? If this is the case, this help sheet has been put together to help you.

NB: When playing with food on or off lead please be aware of others as you may meet food aggressive dogs. Please also be aware of your surroundings and only play games when it is safe to do so.

On Lead Entertainment:

- 1) Take a look in the environment that you are walking. Are there bollards you could encourage your dog to go round? Or maybe if there are two could you do a figure of eight around them? Can you do agility with any accessible equipment?
- 2) Ask your dog for a sit to cross the roads. If they already do this start extending it to every lamppost you pass. You may even just stop and see if your dog can offer the behaviour without you asking for it.
- 3) If your dog can reliably offer a sit, why not wait until you get eye contact before you move on. You will need a lot of patience for this as you may be



stood there for a while before your dog decides to actually look at you. My advice is to start this in dry weather and when you have the time to wait for your dog.

- 4) When you are walking along drop some food behind you and then encourage your dog to 'go find'. You may need to point them in the right direction but be careful you don't point the food out to your dog, remember it's for him to find.
- 5) Practice your loose lead. We often rely on flexi leads or don't bother with a lead and drive to an open space let the dog out. Lead walking is very important and there is always a time when your dog needs to be on a lead. Keep your distances short and gradually build. Encourage your dog to be with you and make it pleasurable. If you are using food you will decrease the amount eventually but you have to start somewhere.

Off Lead Entertainment:



- 1) If you walk near some trees see if the bark is loose enough for you to hide food in it. Ask your dog for a sit and wait whilst you hide food in the bark. You can go all the way round the tree and at different heights for your dog to search. Great for the kids to do and more importantly for the dog to 'go find'
- 2) Play 'find it' games with food. Whilst your dog is with you, make sure your dog is aware you have food and then slowly throw it away from you for your dog to 'go find'. Whilst he is searching you can continue walking, he'll soon catch you up for more!
- 3) Play 'hide and seek' with your dog. When your dog isn't paying attention hide behind a tree, bush or object. Make sure you can still see your dog and if they start to run in the opposite direction make sure you call them so they can look in the correct area. Don't make it too easy for them but also don't make it too hard.
- 4) Teach your dog to 'go around' items. This could be a tree or goal post. Start off close to the item and gradually build on the distance. This is great for getting a dog moving but they also have to learn how to do it.
- 5) Keep changing direction so your dog has to keep an eye on you. You can reward him when he is with you by dropping food onto the floor and walking away. Walk or run backwards, go from left to right. Become unpredictable so your dog has to keep an eye on you rather than being predictable and boring.

Home Entertainment:

- 1) Scatter your dog's food in the garden or put his food into small pots and hide around the house. This gets your dog to search for his meal, offering brain exercise, which will take him a while to complete.
- 2) Name his toys. Teach him the name of the different toys and see if he can find them or pick them up for you to play with.
- 3) Teach your dog a new trick. It doesn't matter how silly the main thing is you are getting him to work things out.
- 4) Stuff a Kong and get him to either work on this when you go out, when you have visitors or as a dinner replacement
- 5) Carry out some clicker training. We teach this in class and the lovely thing about it is you can use any item as long as they offer behaviour towards the chosen item you can click and feed. It's a fabulous way of tiring a dog.

