



## 5 great ways to engage the canine mind

By Roxanne Hawn

**W**hen Anthony Holloway's children, ages 8, 11, and 12, play with the family's Labrador retriever, Daisy, Anthony encourages them to reinforce her training. "The sit-stay is the most important training we do," he says. "Everything else builds on this simple command. It works in so many situations: feeding, entering and leaving the house, going in the car."

So, the Holloway kids ask Daisy to sit and stay while they hide, then they call her and the dog starts the hunt. When Daisy finds them, Holloway says, "They all run around very ex-

cited. Daisy loves it. The more times they do it, the more excited Daisy gets and the more discipline it takes for her to stay the next time.”

Hide-and-seek incorporates many of the best ways to engage the canine mind. Dogs need physical exercise but, just as humans do, they crave mental stimulation as well. Providing them with challenging games or puzzles makes them more mentally agile and builds the human-animal bond, both of which are critical to a dog's health and happiness.

Generally speaking, dogs' mental capabilities for interaction, memory, and labeling fall somewhere between those of a 2-year-old and a 5-year-old child. “Most of them are capable of thinking about a lot more than we give them credit for,” says Laurie Bergman, VMD, DACVB, a veterinary behaviorist with Metropolitan Veterinary Associates in Norristown, Pennsylvania. “They are very good at learning contexts. They are very good at making associations with things that happen on a regular basis. They recognize patterns, especially when the outcomes are things that they like.”

With all this brainpower at their disposal, most dogs need a certain level of mental activity to stay occupied. The truth is, some dogs are bored silly, but you can change that. Below are some activities for keeping your pet's mind sharp.

### LEARN NEW TRICKS

Have you seen the video games that purport to “train your brain” by making you perform math problems and play strategy games? Interestingly, the same kind of repetition can help your pet keep his mental acuity. Learning or practicing basic commands provides great mental stimulation. When training, make sure that you use reward-based methods (praise, toys, food) rather than punishment-based strategies, which only teach

dogs to avoid, not love, learning.

“Reward-based training gets dogs to perform behaviors because they want to,” explains Dr. Bergman. “Dogs trained this way are always waiting, not just for ‘Am I going to be given one of those commands I know?’ but also for the next thing they are going to learn. They are eager, and they are interested.”

Because dogs focus so much on context, practice training in new locations to present a new challenge, suggests Lisa Radosta-Huntley, DVM, DACVB, a veterinary behaviorist with Florida Veterinary Behavior Service in Royal Palm Beach. When your dog has learned some basic training commands, feel free to start moving on to entertaining tricks. By teaching your dog tricks, you are strengthening your bond with your dog. Plus, it gives you and your canine companion a chance to show off to friends.

Dr. Radosta-Huntley likes teaching dogs everyday tasks as tricks. “Think of things you need help with around the house, and teach your dog to do those,” she says. Examples include picking up laundry, bringing a tissue when you sneeze, or delivering your slippers or newspaper.

### FIND THE FOOD

Wild canids spend 70% of their waking time trying to eat. In our homes, we sharply shorten this process by putting food in bowls in a static location, so the food disappears in minutes. Active-feeding toys can prolong the process and turn mealtime into a fun and mentally stimulating activity.

Many different toys are available. Some get stuffed with food, and others, designed like puzzles, make eating more complicated. In the summer, Dr. Bergman suggests this enrichment trick often used in zoos: Freeze toys and food inside small blocks of ice. Dogs have to work to get the treat and are rewarded for their efforts.



### How Kids Can Enrich Dogs

Even small children can help enrich a dog's experience by sitting in your lap while you toss treats to the dog a few feet away. Eventually, they too can toss food or toys to the dog, with your supervision. Dr. Jamtgaard says such games provide great family interaction and dog contact for youngsters who desperately want it and also teach dogs two important lessons:

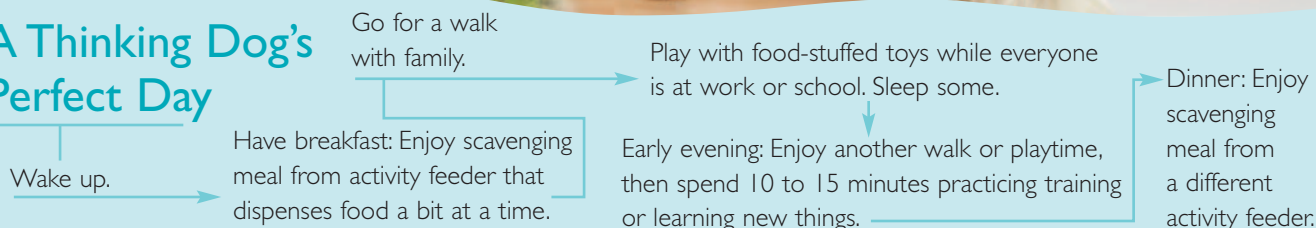
- Good things happen when the child is around.
- Good things happen when they stand back a few feet from the child.

By tossing food or toys, rather than handing them, children can teach dogs to back up and maintain a bubble of space. Plus, it prevents excited kids or dogs from getting into tugging matches.



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### A Thinking Dog's Perfect Day



### HUNT IT DOWN

Teach your dog the names of several items by having him either retrieve them or, for breeds that don't retrieve, poke them with his nose. Jennie Willis Jamtgaard, PhD, a behaviorist with Colorado State University's veterinary school, suggests starting with toys since dogs already love them. Pick one toy, and reward the dog for finding it. Once the dog is consistently going to the item, say the toy's name, and continue to reward him for engaging with the toy when he hears the name.

Then, add a second toy, but still only reward his attention to the first, until that pattern is set. Keep adding new toys and rewarding for only one toy until the dog does it consistently. Then, take away all but the first two toys, and teach the dog the name of the second toy in the same way, adding others to up the ante.

This process takes a lot of mental energy, so practice it for only 15 minutes a day over many days. "The good news," says Dr. Jamtgaard, "is that with every subsequent session, it gets easier and goes faster."

Eventually, most dogs will be able to pick the correct item out of a pile. Once the dog knows the names well, you can also hide toys around the house and tell him "Find ball," "Find

Teddy," or whatever toys he has been trained to find.

When you start moving the toy into another room, Dr. Bergman recommends making it an easy location—just inside the door of the next room. "Don't make it too challenging, or you're going to have a dog that learns how to open cabinets," she warns.

### SMELL IT OUT

Teaching a dog to recognize scent is a similar process to the one above; basically, you just swap toys for smells. This is how dogs play hide-and-seek with people—by tracking their smell. Dr. Jamtgaard explains that dogs wade through "a chemical world" full of smells. The canine sense of smell is so keen that dogs can detect scents that differ chemically by only one carbon atom.

"Some of the scents dogs can detect best are in the butyric acid category—earthy smells, sweat smells," she says. "So, one of the best things to start with is beer. Not a whole beer, not the liquid, but take a cotton ball and soak it in beer, then put it inside a container with holes in the lid."

After beer, Dr. Jamtgaard recommends using lotions or a light perfume as your second smell, but she warns against astringent scents like those of cleaners because they can be harsh to

dogs' sensitive noses. You also want to avoid using food items because dogs will likely want to eat them.

Teach the names of different smells, as you did before with the toys, and reward the dog for alerting to them.

When you're ready to play "man-hunt," put a piece of someone's worn clothing inside a bag, and let the dog stick his head in and get a really good flood of that scent. Then tell him, "Find so-and-so."

### TAP INTO INSTINCT

Typically, when dogs get destructive or unruly, they're acting on instinct. So, when teaching thinking games, Dr. Radosta-Huntley suggests tapping into your dog's innate talent. Pay particular attention to the breed of your pet. Dogs have been bred over hundreds of years to accentuate certain talents. If you can tailor your play to these innate preferences, you have a better chance of engaging with your pet. For example, terriers were bred to root around in the dirt and find vermin, so hide toys under blankets when playing with a terrier.

The goal, ultimately, is to engage your dog as the thinking creature he is. Canine Einstein or not, he'll thank you for the challenge. **HP**

*A freelance writer and frequent contributor to HealthyPet, Roxanne Hawn spends loads of time playing with her adopted border collie, Lilly Elizabeth.*