



# Mental & Physical Stimulation

**Most pet dogs lead criminally under-stimulated lives.** If your dog lived in the wild he would spend the majority of his time in survival activities. He would be hunting for his dinner. He would have to find prey, run it down, hang onto and kill it, and then rip it apart to eat it! He might even have to protect it from other predators. Furthermore, he would probably have to make several finds and run-downs before he successfully made a kill. That's a lot of work! Dogs are programmed to work -- they need and want a job. Busy dogs are happy dogs.

**There are several ideas in this handout that you can use to keep your dog busy.**

However, your imagination is the limit -- as long as it is safe and keeps your dog occupied, do it! If you come up with a great idea, please share it with me and other dog owners.



## Feeding Your Dog

### **Nothing In Life Free (NILF) Rule**

Never give your dog food without making him work for it. It can be as simple as a "sit" or as complicated as running an agility course. This includes treats, handouts while you're fixing your own meal, and putting his bowl down in front of him (although I hope after reading this handout, your dog won't be using a bowl anymore). This also means everyone in the family. There's always a softie who thinks it's mean, but in reality, it's meaner to not make your dog work than to make him work.

### **Buster Cubes**

If you feed your dog dry food, feed it in a Buster Cube. This is a square-shaped ball which you fill with kibble and the dog has to roll it around on the floor to get the kibble out. You can adjust the holes that the kibble comes out of, so as your dog gets better at getting the food out, make the holes smaller.

### **Kongs**

Kongs are meant to be stuffed! You can be conventional and stuff them with peanut butter or cream cheese, or you can be creative and feed your dog's dinner in the Kong and then hide it.

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Following are some stuffing tips:

- Buy 2 or more Kongs, and stuff them all at the same time. This way you will save time.
- Peanut butter, store bought Kong Stuffing, cream cheese, etc.
- Canned dog food.
- Pre-mix canned dog food with chopped hot dogs, cheese, commercial dog treats, and any other goodies and keep in your refrigerator.
- Stuff and freeze. It will take your dog longer to get the frozen stuffing out.
- Use a plug of white bread at the opening and then freeze.
- Put frozen Kong in an old margarine container, wrap in several layers of old rags with complicated knots, and then hide. (You need to work up to this one -- hide and show your dog, so he knows the game; initially make the wrapping not too complicated, etc..)
- Hide them in the house (under couch cushions, behind doors, under beds, etc.) or hide them outside -- if it's not a problem, you can even bury them!

## Scattering

Throw your dog's food out on the lawn. This way he must hunt for his dinner. If you have more than one dog, be sure they are both getting enough food.

## Exercise

Remember the saying: If your dog is overweight, you aren't getting enough exercise!

## Walks

All dogs need exercise. A walk is great for your dog's mental stimulation -it allows them plenty of sniff and pee time, and usually allows them to encounter other dogs and people. However, it is not a substitute for strenuous exercise. If you exercise by jogging, bike riding, etc., take your dog with you (after consulting your vet as to your dog's condition and capability).

## Fetch

Teach your dog fetch. It's a great way for you to remain a couch potato but still give your dog good exercise. You can come home after a hard day's work, veg out on the chaise with a cool drink and exercise your throwing arm. Commune with nature while exercising your dog!! Frisbee!! Most dogs love Frisbee.

## Tug-of-War

Tug is a great energy burner, and it also burns their predatory energy. Too often, people would like to ignore the fact that dogs are predators, or, even worse, try to eradicate their predatory drive. This is a big mistake. Dogs are predators! We will never change that, and instead of ignoring it and hoping it goes away, let's channel it into useful activities. If you play Tug, just be sure you follow some simple ground rules:

- Use a specific toy for tug, and this is your toy, not the dog's. When not playing tug, the toy goes up, out of the dog's reach
- Use a specific command for beginning and continuing the tug game, such as "tug."

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- Your dog must “give” or “drop it” on command. Reward a correct response with food treats, and do not play tug until he has the command down pat. Then gradually build him up. Teaching a half-hearted “drop it” command and then expecting your dog to “drop it” in the middle of a heated game of tug is asking too much. If he fails to “drop it” on command, the game immediately stops for a time-out penalty (about 1 minute should do it). To resume the game, give your “tug” command. If the dog again will not “drop it,” stop that play session and put the toy away. Most dogs love to play tug, and will soon learn the rules.
- Use the tug game as an opportunity to improve your dog’s obedience. Give him a “drop it” command, make him down, roll over, or whatever, and then resume the game. Chances are he’ll eventually roll over so quick you’ll hardly see it, because he wants to get back to that tug game.
- If the dog grabs the toy without invitation, have a time-out penalty or end the game.
- The dog must never touch you with his teeth. That should be an immediate end of game. Even if you offer him your hand, he should go out of his way to avoid it. Dogs are extremely quick with their mouths, much quicker than we are with our hands. Don’t ever assume that he touched you with his teeth “by accident.” Make no exceptions to this rule.

Most dogs really love to play tug, so you can use this as a reward for good behavior!

## Parks and Dog-Dog Interactions

If your dog has a reliable recall, take him to an off-leash park and let him run and play. If he doesn’t have a reliable recall, teach him one. Find a dog park in your town. If there isn’t one, become civic-minded and get all the dog owners you run across to sign a petition to start one. Set up play-dates with other dogs. There’s nothing better for dogs than playing with other dogs. It gives them good exercise, increases their social skills and problem solving abilities, and is great exercise.

## Dog Sports

There are a lot of dog sports out there which are fun for you and your dog. You can participate at the level you choose -- you can do it just for fun, or you can become competitive. Dogs love sports any way they can get them.

Take into consideration your dog’s breed, his personality and temperament, and where you live. If you have a Malamute, you might want to consider dog carting! Or, if you have a Border Collie, you’ll certainly want to consider agility or fly-ball. Any dog can compete in any sport, but some dogs are more suited to some sports than others.

Following is a list of sports (not comprehensive by any means): Obedience Competition

- Agility
- Fly-ball
- Frisbee Sports
- Water Rescue



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- Scent Work
- Carting
- Working Trials
- Field Trials
- Lure Coursing
- Dock Diving, etc.

The list goes on and on. Figure out what is involved in participating in a particular sport -- how much time and equipment is required, how far do you have to travel, what would you and your dog enjoy, and go from there.

## Obedience

Obedience training is great mental exercise for your dog. You should institute the NILF rule and begin making your dog do something before he gets food. When he becomes good at one thing, start making him give you two-fers (i.e., a sit and a down) before he gets the food. This will help him really distinguish between the commands. Often dogs are just guessing as to what it is you want.

## Toys

### Balls

There are various balls your dog can entertain himself with. Activity balls are another stuffing toy, Wiggly Giggly balls make noise when the dog moves it, plain old balls can be lots of fun.

### Chews

You should always make sure your dog has plenty of chew toys. They need to chew to keep their jaw muscles and teeth in good shape. Chewing is not simply a "puppy thing," adults also need to chew. You might need to experiment to find out what kind of chew toys your dog prefers, but make sure he has plenty around. This will also keep him from chewing things he shouldn't be chewing.

### Dissecting

Stuffed toys, like tug, help release a dog's predatory energy. If you watch your dog, you'll notice that his dissection of stuffed toys is very ritualised -- this is what he would do if he had caught a prey animal. Usually, they hold it down with their feet, and dissect the middle (stomach) of the toy. This is excellent play for a dog. These toys can be expensive, so I go around to garage sales and get cheap stuffed animals. Be sure you cut off anything that can be harmful, such as button eyes, voice boxes, etc. Also, supervise when your dog is dissecting a toy, because you don't really want him to eat the innards -- they aren't particularly good for them.

Dissecting should be a special treat, not an all day, every day kind of activity. If your dog is really into dissecting, you can use this as a reward for good behavior, or exceptional performance.



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This list is only the beginning of ways to keep your dog mentally and physically stimulated. Use your imagination. The only criteria should be that you cause no harm - to your dog or to others. Have fun with your dog!!

## Give Your Dog a Job!

One of the best things you can do for your dog is give him a regular job. Dogs need and love to work. Whether it's fetching the newspaper or bringing you a tissue when you sneeze, give your dog chores, just like you would your kids.



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