

# Enrichment Toys and Activities that Benefit Your Dog's Mental Health

By their very nature, dogs are exploring, investigative and curious animals who are in constant need of physical and mental stimulation to be satisfied. This means that your dog will naturally chew, dig, bark and get into things because they are simply wired that way.

Your job is to provide *acceptable* outlets for these activities. When your dog picks up something he shouldn't, trade him for something much more interesting that he should play with - make a big deal about the toy you have to offer! Rotate his toys and chews to keep them interesting. When you see him choose the right thing, notice it by praising him!

Toys fall into two categories: INTERACTIVE and PACIFIER. Interactive toys are the most fun when played with you. Pacifier toys are toys designed to keep a bored dog occupied.

## PROVIDE SAFE PACIFIERS FOR "ALONE TIME"

**Kongs:** Rubber toys that are cylindrical in shape and bounce around on the floor. Add a bit of peanut butter, a square of cheese or dry kibble. Fill several and hide them in the house or yard and they will keep your dog busy for hours. Visit the Kong company website for recipe ideas at <http://www.kongcompany.com>.

**Nylabones:** They come in a variety of shapes, sizes and firmness - from the "edible" varieties which are intended to be eaten, to the dental bones designed to massage gums and clean teeth, to the Galileo version for the most powerful chewers. If your dog isn't interested, roughen the edges so it looks like another dog enjoyed it first, and then rub peanut butter or squeeze cheese into the crevasses.

**Chew toys:** Hooves, rawhide, pig ears, knuckle bones, etc. Chosen carefully (the right size and hardness for your dog's particular chewing style) can provide hours of chewing satisfaction.

**Knotted Ropes:** Chewing a knotted rope can massage gums and keep your dog's teeth clean, plus the added play value of tossing and pouncing! Some come with rubber toys or tennis balls added for even more fun. You can hide biscuits in the knots to encourage your dog and add interest.

**Dental Devices:** Various shapes and sizes of flexible, nubby edges massage gums and clean teeth. Some are designed so you can put doggy toothpaste in the grooves and let your dog brush his own teeth!

**Fleece Toys:** Many retrievers and "mothering types" seem to find comfort in carrying a soft toy with them, and frequently present them to their owners upon their arrival home from a long day at work.



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## INTERACTIVE BRAIN TOYS FOR SELF-AMUSEMENT:

**Buster Cubes:** This durable plastic cube gives dogs mental stimulation, exercise and relief from boredom. It is designed to be filled with bite sized dry pet food or treats. The food is released as the dog rolls the cube with its nose or its paws.

**Huge Balls:** Herding breeds especially love playing soccer alone or with you.

**A Suspended Ball:** Remember playing tether ball as a kid? Many dogs also enjoy this game, especially boxers and bull dog breeds. The ball should be suspended from a horizontal pole, not a vertical one, for safety.

**A Kid's Wading Pool:** Water-loving breeds will love spending hot summer days splashing in a shallow kid's wading pool!

**A Sandbox of His Own:** If your dog loves to dig, make him an appropriate place to do it. Bury his favorite toys, bones and a biscuit or two before you turn the dog out to play.

## BRAIN GAMES

**Tricks:** There is no limit to the fun tricks you can teach your dog! Sit up, shake hands, roll over, chase your tail, take a bow, balance a biscuit on his nose...the list goes on and on!

**Hide his breakfast:** Using his nose can be one of the most thrilling activities for your dog. Leave a widely spaced trail of kibble to a hidden bowl. Gradually, day by day, decrease the number of "clues" until your dog finds the bowl all on their own!

**Hide and Seek:** Have a family member hide, have them call "come!" and send the dog to find them - start out easy and make it more and more difficult day by day. Play this game in the dark to encourage your dog to use his sense of smell.

**Find your toys:** Take your dog out of the room and hide his favorite toy, then allow him back into the room to find it. If your dog doesn't like toys, play "hide the biscuit" instead. Variation: Name his toys - and send him to retrieve them by name. Can you put out a pile of his favorites and have him retrieve them one by one, by name?

**Message Delivery:** Teach your dog to deliver notes or other items to other family members. "Take it to Daddy" could save you a trip downstairs and give your dog a job he can be proud of!

**Obstacle Courses:** Over, under, around and through. Large cardboard boxes can become tunnels, a wide board and a couple of cinder blocks can become a bridge. (See agility below.)



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Continued

## ACTIVE GAMES & OTHER ACTIVITIES

**Retrieving:** "Sit" "stay" "get it" "out" - light hand weights, soft toys, tennis balls, etc.

**Jumping:** Start slowly. Keep the jumps low and the landing surface soft, especially for young dogs. Avoid repetitive jumping or height until your dog is completely through growing.

**Frisbee:** Teach your dog to catch a Frisbee and look into local Frisbee teams!

**Bike Riding /Jogging:** Start slow and build distance gradually. Seek out soft surfaces and short distances for young dogs. Be sure to check paw pads before and after every run, and avoid the peak heat times of the day.

**Swimming:** Is good exercise and a great way to cool off. Not all dogs naturally know how to swim! Doggy life jackets are a good idea when boating. Important: swimming pools are strictly off-limits to unsupervised dogs.

## DOG SPORTS

**AKC /UKC Obedience Trials:** Dogs are judged on precision and response to commands.

**Conformation:** Dogs are judged on appearance and movement. Dogs receiving a certain number of points can earn the title of "Champion".

**Tracking:** Following an aged scent trail with his nose over different terrain.

**Agility:** Jumps, hurdles, tunnels, weave poles, an A-frame and even a teeter-totter - a timed event.

**Herding:** For those breeds bred to herd sheep or cattle. A favorite of Border Collies, Australian shepherds, Cattle Dogs and many others.

**Flyball:** The dog jumps a series of low hurdles and triggers a tennis ball from a spring-loaded box, then returns with the ball over the jumps to the handler.

**Scent Hurdle:** Like Flyball only the dogs retrieve a dumbbell carrying their handler's scent.

**Lure Coursing:** The sport of sighthounds like Whippets, Greyhounds, Afghans, Salukis, Pharaoh Hounds and Basenjis. A lure (often a white plastic bag) travels along a pulley system along a varied course. Dogs are judged on speed, agility and style.

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## SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY

**Pet-Assisted Therapy:** Dog/handler teams visit patients and work with therapists in hospital & nursing home settings.

**Search and Rescue:** Working with police & sheriff's departments to find lost or missing persons.

**Service Dogs:** Aiding the handicapped as eyes for the blind, ears for the deaf, hands for the disabled and even confidence for mentally disadvantaged.