

Boredom Busters!

Summer heat waves, winter snowstorms, and spring rains can hinder your dog's opportunity to enjoy favorite activities. Even in cooperative weather, injury, illness, and even the gradual shift toward senior status can reduce your opportunities to keep your dogs active and engaged in their environment. But take heart, unique options abound to promote mental enrichment and maintain physical activity in your dog's daily life at every stage and in all weather. Here are some favorite strategies to relieve boredom and ensure enriched, healthy days together.

SCAVENGER HUNT

An opportunity to forage for food provides an enjoyable strategy for your dog to siphon off some physical energy, engage his brain in a search activity, and use his scenting capabilities. To spice up the routine of mealtime, sprinkle your dog's kibble in the yard, trail it through the grass and around obstacles, under outdoor toys, and end in a final kibble treasure. Now sit back and watch him use his muscles and mind to seek and find his treasure.

PUZZLE IT OUT

On rainy days (or any day) make mealtime an educational and satisfying endeavor. Meal and treat-dispensing toys come in all shapes and sizes from cooperative puzzles to enjoy together to toys for your dog to toss, bounce, and chew to release the food. For very advanced dogs, try freezing a food toy filled with kibble, cream cheese, or peanut butter for a long-lasting, satisfying chew. Jaws get a workout and the body stays in motion, culminating in a delicious prize.

TAKE A SMELL WALK

Popularized by Alexandra Horowitz in her book *Inside of a Dog*, "smell walks" are an excellent way to improve the quality of your dog's walks, especially for dogs on limited activity. On your next walk, shift the focus away from exercise to a leisurely scenting activity. Allow your dog to walk where he chooses, engage in each interesting (and safe) smell he finds, and let him get his fill before cruising on for the next sniff. You may only walk a block in 20 minutes, but your dog's brain is highly active, investigating those areas he typically bypasses on an exercise walk.

TRAIN THE BRAIN

Pull out a clicker and treats, set a box, cone, or water bottle on the floor, and be amazed by the innovative behaviors your dog can perform. Click and treat for any interaction with the item and shape toward a behavior like stand in the box, knock over the cone, or spin the bottle. For dogs on activity restrictions, capture small, fun behaviors with your clicker like yawn, stick out your tongue, sneeze, and even raise your eyebrow!

GAME DAY

Adapt indoor children's games to have a blast incorporating training with fun. Hide and go seek is a favorite to polish your dog's recall and add the joy of a search. Children love to participate as well, so engage the whole family. Place a handful of treats on the floor. While your dog is busy eating them, quickly run and hide in another room. Call your dog to come and reward him when his nose finds you! Drop some more treats and hide again.

A child's indoor bowling set is a fantastic gaming activity for your dog. For dogs new to the game, simply place out a single pin. When he knocks it over, click and treat! Progress to two pins together and click and treat for knocking both pins over. Increase number of pins for a more advanced game. Alternatively, place only the soft bowling ball on the ground. Click and treat for pushing the ball. For very savvy dogs, incorporate one pin with the ball and click/treat for rolling the ball into the pin.

Introduce your dog to one of the hottest canine sports: Nose Work! Find a couple of identical boxes. Mark a small X on one box to designate (for yourself) the only box in which to place a treat. Start with the X box and put a treat inside. Allow your dog to find the treat inside. After a few repetitions, bring out the second identical box. Out of your dog's sight, hide a treat in the original box and then place both boxes on the ground. Watch him use his nose to find the correct box and earn his reward. Incorporate more boxes for advanced scenting skills.

DIG FOR GOLD

The opportunity to dig is a very satisfying activity for many dogs, relieving boredom and fulfilling a natural desire. To accommodate serious diggers, create acceptable dig spots in your yard. Use a kiddie pool or create a small area in your yard similar to a sandbox in which digging will be allowed. Fill with loose soil and sand and loosely buried treasure like soft toys and chew options. Encourage your dog to dig for artifacts!

As always, if your household contains multiple pets, exercise extreme caution when using food items such as food puzzles, stuffed food toys, etc. Many animals have difficulty sharing food items with one another. This is normal behavior and should be expected. Multi-animal households can still utilize the benefits of food toys by using separation (baby gates or separate rooms).