

TOYS

For dogs to remain behaviourally healthy it is important that we meet their needs for physical exercise and mental stimulation. In general, physical exercise is considered more frequently than the need for engaging the brain. However, the need for mental stimulation can be met in a number of ways and in all likelihood a combination of these will be most effective. Some examples for mental stimulation include

- Walks that allow time for sniffing and environmental exploration.
- Games with people such as 'hide and seek'.
- Games with other dogs.
- Positive reinforcement based training.
- Fun training games.
- Toys to play with alone.
- Toys to play with others.



This handout gives some advice regarding **toy selection and use**.

Toys can be broadly divided into two categories, those that a dog plays with on his own (solitary play) and those that require interaction with another dog or a person (social play). As providing variety is advisable, both categories should be supplied.

Toys for social play include:

- Tug toys of all descriptions.
- Throwing toys such as balls and frisbees.
- Puzzle toys (games that require owner participation, such as toys where treats are hidden under removable cups or under movable tiles).

When selecting any of these toys it is important that they are checked to ensure that they do not have sharp edges which can injure your dog's mouth. When tug toys are considered it is also important that they are big enough to allow your dog's mouth and your hand to tug at the same time, without the risk of you being bitten.

When playing you need to teach your dog rules to ensure that you minimise the risk of being bitten and to ensure that your dog will release the item on request. Teaching your dog to take and leave on cue is important to prevent damage or injury should he at any time try to tug on something inappropriate. Teaching a good return to you and release cue for thrown items is also essential for the same reason. For this reason it is not advisable to engage in chase games when your dog has something in his mouth as he is then more likely to run off with items than return them to you.

When throwing toys such as balls and frisbees, take care to position the throw to minimise stress on your dog's joints and spine when chasing. For example throwing items low to the ground minimises jumping and twisting in the air, which may cause injury.

Most dogs, as long as they are interested in food, can be taught to play with puzzle toys. These are particularly valuable for elderly dogs, dogs with health problems that limit their ability to play physical games and for dogs that are recuperating from surgery. They are also

games that can be played in a confined space and as they still rely on owner interaction, they encourage appropriate social engagement.

Toys for solitary play:

- Chews – for example rawhide.
- Food dispensing balls.
- Food containing rubber toys.
- Squeaky toys.
- Soft furry toys.
- Irretrievable balls.



Whenever a chew is selected ensure that it is the correct size for your dog. Small chews can pose a choking hazard. As with all toys, there may be dogs where the provision of chews is not suitable, for example greedy dogs that tear off and swallow large pieces.

If you are trying to encourage your puppy to chew on appropriate chews or toys you can make them more appealing by rubbing something tasty over them – such as pat , peanut butter, Bovril, yoghurt etc. or you could soak a rawhide in meat juice for a short period.

Many dogs will play with squeaky toys or carry around soft furry toys without destroying them. However, some dogs will tear up all such toys if they are allowed unsupervised access. If your dog shows a tendency to destroy toys, please contact a knowledgeable behaviourist or trainer for advice regarding tougher squeaky and soft toys. Alternatively just use them during times when you interact with your dog and remove them at all other times. Swallowed toys can constitute a health risk.

Balls that are too large to be picked up and carried can provide entertainment as dogs push them around with their nose or paws. Many dogs enjoy these but play often needs to be supervised to prevent injury, damage to property or extreme frustration if a dog insists on trying to retrieve them or gets them stuck somewhere and cannot release them. In most cases supervised games or games that include the owner make the best use of these toys.

Probably the most useful group of toys for solitary play are those in which food can be placed as most dogs will engage with these, even if they are not interested in soft or furry toys. This group includes the toys which can be rolled around to release food, such as treat balls, food pyramids and Buster Cubes as well as those which need to be chewed and manipulated such as the Kong, Kong stuff-a-ball, Twist 'n Treat etc. By making the treats easy to obtain when you first introduce your dog to these toys and then gradually making them more difficult to empty, dogs can be taught to work persistently to recover the food.

Various internet websites give good advice for filling these toys. For dogs that need to be left alone for periods of time, as well as for young puppies that need additional entertainment and appropriate direction of chewing, entire meals can be fed from these toys.

Toy safety

Always select the correct size toy as an item that is too small can lodge in the throat or be swallowed. Also ensure that there are not small parts that can be removed and also become a choking risk or if swallowed lodge in the intestines. For this reason too it is advisable for most dogs (except those that show no inclination to destroy toys) that toys that are difficult to destroy are selected.

As it is never possible to guarantee that a toy cannot be broken into component parts and swallowed, initial interaction with all toys should be supervised. If over time your dog appears unlikely to chew or tear the toy into dangerous pieces, you can consider leaving the toy available for unsupervised play. In these instances it is still important to check the toy periodically to ensure that it is still safe.

Some dogs can become protective of toys or chews and this needs to be monitored where other dogs or people could be put at risk from a dog defending such an item. Should your dog show any inclination to defend toys please immediately contact a suitably qualified behaviourist for assistance in resolving the situation.



Can you suggest home made toys?

It is possible to provide home made toys for dogs as long as safety is considered at all times. The following are a few suggestions, however, these may not be suitable for all dogs as some dogs will try to consume them

- **Cardboard boxes** (with all staples etc removed)
 - For tearing to pieces.
 - Closed with food treats or toys inside to motivate the dog to open them.
- **Plastic bottles** (such as those containing cold drinks, always remove small components such as labels and lids, and make sure your dog will not rip it up)
 - For general play.
 - To put food inside for the dog to bat around to get at the food.
- **Plastic mesh bags** in which a few light plastic lids, cardboard tubes etc are placed and the end tied closed. This provides a floppy toy which some dogs enjoy throwing around and shaking.
- **Length of towelling** or strong cloth with a few knots tied in it to make a tug toy.

General

If toys are constantly available, most dogs will lose interest in them after a short time. There are a few ways of overcoming this problem, for example:

- Pack all the toys away and present your dog with 2 or 3 at a time, leave them around for a couple of days before removing one or 2 and replacing them with others. In this way they retain their novelty.
- Create a toy box – place all the toys in a box or bucket and teach your dog to find them there. Most dogs quickly get the idea of helping themselves to whichever toy they like.

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