

Mental Stimulation and Boredom Busters for your Dog

We have all heard that “A tired dog is a good dog!” But what does that really mean? Should you take your dog running or hiking for several miles a day? Should you play tug or fetch with your dog until he is exhausted? While it is true that many dogs would benefit from more physical exercise, it is important to note that mental exercise and stimulation is just as important for helping your dog relax and become a well-behaved member of your family!

What is mental stimulation and what does that mean, exactly? Remember back in school when you sat at a desk for approximately 7 hours and came home completely exhausted? You didn't run for several miles but you were certainly ready for a nap! That's because your brain was tired; your brain worked all day processing what you were learning. You may have been doing mathematical calculations, discussing literature, drawing conclusions, and engaging in meaningful conversation. Your brain requires fuel to function (in the form of food, vitamins, and minerals) just like your body's muscles. When your brain uses fuel, it leaves you mentally tired and it's important that we help our dogs use their brains so they feel mentally tired in addition to providing our dogs with plenty of physical exercise.

What does that mean in terms of our dogs? Have you ever taken your dog for a 6 mile walk only to return home and have your dog bouncing off the walls ready to play after a 20 minute nap? If so, then it's time to explore more ways of providing your dog with mental stimulation so we can get their brain working harder than their body.

It's important to note the importance of a combination of mental exercise / stimulation and physical exercise. Although additional physical exercise can be beneficial for many of our canine companions, mixing things up and adding mental stimulation to your dog's routine helps to ensure that your dog becomes physically and mentally tired. If you only increase physical exercise, you could be increasing your dog's stamina so they are primed for more physical exercise rather than actually tiring your dog out!



There are several ways to provide more mental stimulation for your dog. This list and these descriptions are just some of the possible options available to you; talk to your friends and family who have pets, search the internet, and get creative to come up with other ways of giving your dog mental stimulation.

1. **Basic Obedience or Advanced Training Classes:** It's no surprise that this is first on the list. If you haven't taken your dog to a basic training class, then get going! Training your dog is a lot of fun. It builds the bond between you and your dog and also helps to teach your dog to reliably respond to your requests. This means you have a dog who is mentally more tired and a dog who wants to respond to you – that's a win-win! Don't forget to practice what you learn at home, on walks, and in every environment you go to with your dog!
2. **“Puzzle Toys,” “Treat Dispensing Toys,” or “Work-to-Eat” toys:** Rather than providing your dog with a bowl full of kibble that's inhaled in less than a minute, provide your dog's food in a toy



that requires him to think and maneuver in order to get the kibble out. There are a variety of toys out there now that are specifically made to help your dog use his brain while eating. Some options are a Kong stuffed with a mixture of kibble and canned food, or these items meant for dry kibble only: Kong Wobbler, Omega Paw Tricky Treat Ball, Busy Buddy Tug-A-Jug, Buster Food Cube, Busy Buddy Kibble Nibble, Busy Buddy Magic Mushroom, and the IQ Treat Ball. Outward Hound and Ethical Pet are two additional companies that make a variety of slow feeding dog bowls and puzzle toys that will keep your dog's food lasting longer. When your dog has to work for his food, it takes him longer to eat and he has to think in order to accomplish his goal, which results in a dog who is more mentally tired!

3. **Nosework Games:** Use your dog's natural sniffing ability to keep his brain active! Teach your dog the words "Find it!" by saying the words and then tossing the food on the floor. Once you say "Find it!" and your dog starts searching for the food on the floor BEFORE you've tossed it, you know your dog understands what the words mean. Once your dog understands the game, try putting a treat or a couple of pieces of kibble in a cardboard box or other similar container and tell your dog to "Find it!" At first, make it easy for your dog to search so your dog enjoys the game. Then branch out and get creative. Put treats underneath boxes, hide old cereal or pasta boxes under chairs, the dining room table, or behind furniture and get your dog to search for the items!
4. **Teach Tricks:** There are lots of books out there that describe how you can teach your dog to shake paws, spin, jump through hula hoops, clean up his toys, etc. Be careful here – look specifically for a book that uses rewards-based training so you are rewarding your dog with nice things when he learns something new! Reinforcement-based training is the best way to build and maintain your relationship with your dog and teaching your dog tricks is a fun way to mentally tire out your dog.
5. **Mix Play and Training:** Remember all of those basic obedience cues your dog learned in classes? Remember to use them occasionally and reinforce them with things your dog loves! For instance, does your dog love to play fetch? Ask him to sit and stay before throwing his favorite ball! Or does your dog like to play tug? Have him sit and wait before you tell him to "take it!" It doesn't matter what you ask your dog to do before you throw the ball, as long as you ask for something and they comply! This can also help teach your dog to calm himself down and think in the midst of playing so he doesn't get too rowdy!

Remember, your goal here is to mix both mental and physical exercise so you have a tired dog so get creative! Not only will your dog become more tired and relaxed, "training" becomes a fun activity that you and your dog do together!