

5 Mind-Challenging Games to Play with Your Dog

All dogs need mental stimulation and vigorous daily exercise, and many don't receive enough of either. These rousing, problem-solving games will delight your pup, and you'll enjoy the added bonus — the strong bond you build with your dog while playing them.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- All dogs need mental stimulation, and playing games with your pet is an excellent way to provide it, especially on days when he doesn't get much physical exercise
- To get the most out of learning games, your dog should reliably respond to basic obedience commands
- Hide and seek is a game most dogs absolutely love, along with tug
- All you need for this simple problem-solving game is a treat and some string
- More challenging games include teaching your dog the names of toys and how to put her toys back in her toy basket

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The vast majority of canine companions these days don't get nearly enough of the type of physical activity they're designed for. In fact, many dogs who develop behavioral problems can be "cured" simply by increasing the amount of daily exercise they get. The phrase "a tired dog is a good dog" is spot on.

One of the problems dog parents face in today's busy, distraction-filled world is finding the time to engage their pet in vigorous daily exercise. In addition, there are certain breeds and individual dogs that require plenty of mental stimulation in addition to physical exercise to remain well-balanced.

If you're looking for ways to keep your own dog mentally stimulated, learning games are an excellent option — especially on days when you're not able to provide your furry family member with the required amount of heart-thumping exercise. An added bonus of engaging your dog in learning games is that it strengthens the bond you share.

The following game ideas will be much more fun and rewarding for both of you if your dog has had some **basic obedience training**, or at a minimum responds consistently to verbal commands like sit, stay, lie down, and so forth.

5 Mentally Stimulating Games for Dogs

1. **Hide and seek** — Teaching your dog to play hide and seek (you hide, he seeks) fine-tunes his skill at coming when called, as well as his ability to respond to your commands even when he can't see you. It also gives him opportunities to use his **natural scent tracking talents** in a fun and mentally stimulating way.

The first step is to pick a few easy-to-find hiding places before you involve your dog, and stash some of his favorite treats in those spots. Next, ask him to “sit and stay,” and then go hide. When you’re ready, give the “come” command and when he finds you, reward him with a treat and lots of praise. As he gets better at the game, intermittently reward him only with praise, and if possible, pick more challenging spots around the house to hide.

Chances are, your dog’s recall ability will dramatically improve if you play hide and seek with him regularly. Also consider playing the game in a safe outdoor area where your dog can be off leash, to help him learn to keep you in sight and to look for you if you get separated.

2. **Problem solving** — Problem solving is a great confidence booster for dogs. Tie one end of a piece of string or a long shoelace to a treat. With your dog observing, place the treat beneath an obstacle that is low enough to the ground that your dog can’t fit under it, such as a piece of furniture.

The treat should also be far enough under the obstacle that your dog can’t reach it with her mouth or a paw. Prompt her to “get the treat” and see if she can figure out that she needs to pull on the string to get to it.

Let her work to solve the problem for a short time (but not to the point of frustration) before demonstrating how it’s done by slowly pulling the string yourself until the treat appears. Most dogs will catch on quickly once they make the connection between the string and the treat.

3. **Put your toys away** — Your dog will need to respond to your “drop it” command in order to learn this game. And while teaching her to put her toys away may seem more beneficial for you than your dog, it’s actually great mental stimulation and a confidence-builder for her as long as you’re patient and committed to keeping things positive and fun.

Clicker trained dogs tend to pick up the game more quickly because you can reward smaller behaviors (with clicks and treats) that lead to the full behavior, which is to pick up a toy, walk with it to the toy basket, drop it in and leave it. The ultimate goal is to teach your dog that a command like “put the toy away” means to find the toy(s) that aren’t in the toy basket and put them there.

It’s best to start by having your dog pick up a toy near her toy basket or hand her a toy as you both stand by the basket and asking her to “drop it” into the basket. Give her a treat and lots of praise each time she completes the task. Whenever you find a toy outside the toy basket, have her pick it up (or hand it to her), call her to the toy basket, tell her to “drop it” in, and give her treats and praise each time she succeeds.

Once your dog is reliably returning individual toys to the basket, you can begin rewarding her only after she returns two toys, then three, and so on. Eventually, she gets rewarded only after every toy is back in the basket. Once she gets the general idea, you might be surprised at how quickly she puts her toys away once she realizes she gets a handful of delicious treats for her efforts!

4. **Tug** — Played correctly, tug is both mentally stimulating and great exercise for dogs who dependably respond to “drop it” commands. During games of tug, if your dog gets especially rowdy or mouthy, it’s time to stop. However, it’s fine to let your dog “win” as often as you do, since there’s no evidence it triggers **aggression** or dominance, and in fact, studies show that letting dogs win makes them enjoy the game even more.¹
5. **Toy naming** — Dogs have the ability to associate certain words with certain objects, for example, most quickly learn the meaning of words such as “treat” and “food” or “dinner.” Studies show that on average, dogs can learn 165 different words.²

Another fun, stimulating game to play with your dog involves teaching him the names of specific toys, and then sending him to get a particular toy. You can start by holding a favorite toy, saying the name you've given it, offering it to your dog, and giving him a treat and praise when he takes it. Let's say your dog has a favorite toy that squeaks. Name the toy "Squeaky," and repeat the above routine a couple dozen times.

Then put the toy next to a very different toy and say, "Get Squeaky." If your dog picks up Squeaky, give him a treat and tons of praise. If he selects the other toy, simply take it, place it back next to Squeaky, and repeat the exercise. Once your dog is consistently selecting Squeaky at your prompt, pick another toy and repeat the exercise until he's consistently picking Squeaky over that toy (and other toys, if you want to keep the game going).

If you want to teach your dog the names of other toys, you can repeat the same steps with the next toy, but initially, don't use the toys with names as the alternate toy when you play the game. For example, if your dog can now identify Squeaky and Ball, and you want to teach him the name of a third toy, Mouse, don't put Mouse next to Squeaky or Ball — put it next to a different, unnamed toy.

If you want to increase the level of difficulty of the game, once you have a few toys named and your dog is consistently selecting them over unnamed toys, you can put two named toys next to each other and give him the name of one. If he selects the right toy, he gets a treat.

Once he masters this, ask him for the other toy. You can keep going as long as your dog is having fun and picking the right toys consistently, eventually asking him to pick a specific named toy from a small pile of named toys.

Sources and References

[AKC.org](#)

[PuppyLeaks](#)

[Treehugger](#)

¹ [Positively Victoria Stilwell \(Archived\)](#)

² [Animal Planet \(Archived\)](#)