



BEATING BOREDOM

How to mentally stimulate your mutt!

Is your dog naughty, hyperactive, destructive or disobedient – or just depressed, laying about and looking sad most of the time? If so, he could be suffering from boredom! Boredom doesn't seem like a serious complaint in itself; after all, we all suffer from it from time to time, but in dogs it can lead to all sorts of unwanted and antisocial behaviours.

Some dogs (terriers and collies for example) need to be busy and virtually all dogs need companionship and play with a suitable canine friend. If a dog does not have enough to do, he will find other, often destructive ways to amuse himself. He may also cope with boredom by attention seeking, barking, constantly licking himself, pacing or tail chasing. Alternatively he may become depressed and although this may not directly affect you as the owner, it's just not right to let your dog get this way.

All dogs can become bored or distressed if they are left alone for long periods during the day (and also the night, if their owners make them sleep away from the rest of the family). Dogs Trust does not recommend that any dog should be left alone for longer than 4 hours at a time. If you must leave a dog alone, some of the following ideas may help to break up the time for him.

How can we prevent a dog getting bored?

Dogs are natural scavengers and if allowed to 'go wild' a dog would quite happily keep busy all day looking around for food. This is something that comes naturally, so imagine how awful it is for them to only have one quick meal a day at the same time and place every day. What would you do with the rest of your long, dull day?

Problem solving to find food is a very natural thing for dogs to do and so we can use this in many ways to encourage them to use their brains and keep them happy. It is also why using food as a reward during training is so effective. To keep a dog from being bored and out of trouble in the home, you need to devise all sorts of fun and interesting ways to use part of his daily food ration.

Remember that a dog who has to work too hard for his food when he is starving hungry may become frustrated and possibly aggressive, so always make sure that he has had a 'work-free' meal about half an hour before using these methods.

Why not try the following? Be as imaginative as you can and come up with your own ways to amuse your best friend.

Things to try in the home and garden

- Buy an interactive toy such as a Kong, Havaball or Buster cube. These are all toys that can be filled with food and treats so that your dog has to work to get them out. They either have to lick at the contents which can be packed in tight, or they have to roll the toys with their nose or feet so that the treats fall out of small holes.

- If you are not able to get one of these toys, try a clear plastic soft drink bottle; wash it out thoroughly and cut a few holes in the sides. Half fill the bottle with small treats or dry food and encourage your dog to roll it around the floor, so that the treats fall out. Remember not to put the cap back on as it could come off and your dog could swallow or choke on it.
- Scatter dry food and treats around your house and garden (make sure any poo is picked up from the garden first). Hide food under cushions or behind easily accessible furniture. This encourages scavenging behaviour. It may take your dog hours to find his food.
- Place his food under an upturned bowl, plate or box. Watch him work out how to get to it.
- Use a fairly large cardboard box (depending on your dog's size) and fill it with treats and layers of scrunched up newspaper and blankets. He'll have a lot of fun digging and pulling out the stuffing to get to the treats.

A dog's sense of smell is one of his strongest senses and using his nose can be quite tiring as well as a lot of fun for him – so scent tracking games are very good to prevent boredom.

- Teach him to follow a scent trail. Get a clean old sock or pair of tights and fill the toe with some particularly smelly food that your dog will love. Shut your dog away so that he cannot see. Drag the sock or tights along the floor to a hiding place, such as behind a cushion on the sofa – but don't make the trail too long, until he gets the hang of it. Take a few pieces of the food and place at the beginning of the trail and partway along, to help him on his first few tries. Bring him back into the room to the start of the trail. Encourage him to follow it and he should find the hidden sock. When he finds it, praise him and give him the treats hidden inside. As he gets better at following the trail, stop putting treats along the way to help him and make the trail longer and more complicated. For more of a challenge, try it in the garden.
- If your dog likes to dig in your garden and you're fed up with the holes in your lawn, then why not build your dog his own sand-pit or earth-pit? You can either sink it into the ground or have one that is raised up – just as long as it is big enough for your dog to get in and have a really good dig. Bury toys and treats inside so that your dog will enjoy hours of digging fun, without destroying your flower beds.
- Provide your dog with plenty of chew toys, which you should encourage him to use if you catch him chewing something that he shouldn't. Try him with synthetic bones, dental chews that massage the gums, pigs' ears, large raw beef bones or large rawhide chews. Keep anything that you don't want him to chew out of reach so that he can't be naughty in the first place. Rotate the chew toys that you give him everyday, so that he doesn't get bored with them.
- Consider trying clicker training, a form of training that really encourages your dog to think about what he is doing and can enable you to teach him all sorts of tricks. Obtain a book on this, or visit a local training class using clicker techniques to learn the principles. Once you and your dog get the idea, the sky's the limit!

Outdoors fun and games

Outdoor walks are great to wear dogs out physically, but used to the full will also exercise your dog mentally. Some dogs who are exercised when hungry can show problems with aggressive behaviour, so try to feed about an hour before going out. Consider the following:

- Letting your dog have a really good run off lead in a safe place is essential. Giving him the opportunity to sniff around at will and meet other dogs helps him use his doggy communication skills and allows him to use his sense of smell – all things that use his brain and help keep him happy and contented. Remember that nothing is better for him than a good run and play with a doggy friend – so if you can arrange walks on a regular basis with a canine companion, he'll really benefit from this.
- Take a favourite toy out with you that you keep only for walks. This will make it very special to your dog. Active playing will wear him out a lot more quickly than just walking alone – after you've let him have a good sniff and greeted doggy chums of course! Playing with you will also

help to keep him under control if he is prone to running off. If you and his toy are the most interesting thing on his walk, he won't want to leave you.

- Play hide and seek with your dog. If you are in a safe wooded area or if there are bushes around, wait until your dog is not looking at you and then hide. Call your dog and wait for him to find you. Give him lots of praise and a tasty treat when he does, so that it becomes an exciting and fun game for him. If you are walking your dog with another family member, take turns holding your dog whilst the other hides.
- Why not do some training when you're on a walk? Try some recall training; call him to you for a really tasty treat and then let him go and play. Do this several times during your walk. As well as encouraging him to keep his attention on you and teaching him that coming on command does not have to mean the end of his walk, you'll be training a perfect recall for any sticky situation.

Organised club activities

Why not join a canine activity club? These are great for learning fun new skills as well as giving you both the opportunity to meet and socialise with other dogs and their owners. You could try:

- Agility, Flyball, Obedience training, Tracking, Field Trials or Heelwork to Music

If you would like more information about local clubs, please contact

The Association of Pet Dog Trainers Ireland – www.apdt.ie or

The Irish Kennel Club – 01 453 3300, www.ikc.ie

If you need more advice on this subject please contact us for further information or ask your vet to refer you to a behaviour specialist.

For more information about Dogs Trust, to make a donation or help us in our campaigns please call 01 879 1000 or write to:

Dogs Trust, Ashbourne Road, Finglas, Dublin 11.

www.dogstrust.ie

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