



Your complete guide to natural dog care and training

Whole Dog Journal™

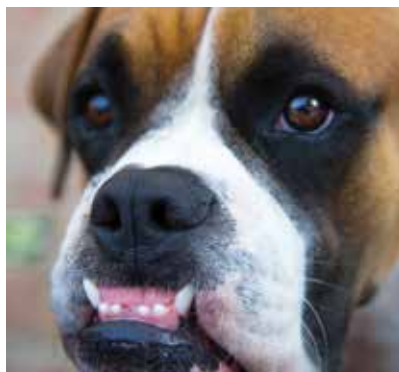
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On page 3. Leave me alone! – How to teach your dog to be happy when he's home alone and why it's so important. (Here's a hint: You want to prevent separation anxiety at all costs.)



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Alone Time

More reasons to teach dogs how to be happy at home by themselves.

I'm incredibly fortunate to have had a career that has allowed me to work from my home for the past 25 years or so. If you are new to working from home while sheltering in place (and, perhaps, also caring for children), you may be one of the thousands of people who observed that your dog was thrilled to have you home all the time. And he or she probably got more walks, too!



But as this issue goes to press, and states are beginning to reduce the sheltering in place restrictions, you may be worrying about how your dog is going to respond when you get to (have to?) go back to work or school. If this is you, we've got your back. On page 3, our Training Editor, Pat Miller, explains how to make sure your dog adjusts smoothly to your absence.

Food-filled Kongs and other food-dispensing toys are frequently prescribed by trainers – and, indeed, by us, too! – for helping dogs pass the time they have to spend alone. The idea is to give them something enjoyable to do, so they are less tempted to be destructive or worried about when you might return. But you should be aware that these food-filled toys and tools are not a panacea! On page 6, Eileen Anderson describes some potential hazards associated with using food dispensers as dog-sitters.

I'd like to add something to the discussion. Pandemic quarantines aside, it's *always* a good time to teach your dog to be comfortable and content at home without you. This goes double for newly adopted dogs and foster dogs, and it goes *triple* for puppies. Teaching your dog that he can relax when you leave him is a valuable life skill, and, since most of us can't be with our dogs all day, every day – not even me, and I *always* work at home! – it enhances the quality of his life. You want him to feel safe and secure when you're gone, don't you?

I'm aware that a lot of us feel better when we're with our dogs than when we are without them – and that some people depend on their dogs as emotional support animals. But even those people – perhaps especially those people! – should be sensitive to the idea that cultivating a dog's emotional dependence on being with people is unfair, maybe even cruel.

I have a number of friends whose dogs suffer from separation anxiety, and that's exactly the correct word, "suffer." These dogs are not just uncomfortable, they are in absolute, being-branded-by-hot-coals agony when their owners leave. Their owners have spent countless hours working through training protocols meant to s-l-o-w-l-y improve the dogs' ability to be left home alone without tearing themselves or their homes apart. Every dog owner should strive to prevent this traumatic disorder from developing if they possibly can.



Amicable Separation

Your dog has likely enjoyed having you home more than usual; here's how to prepare her for being left home alone when you go back to work or school.

Have you been sheltering in place with your dog, courtesy of coronavirus? There will come a time when life goes back to the “new normal” and you’ll go back to work or school, and if you have a dog, you may be worried about how your dog will handle this. The internet is already flooded with articles predicting an epidemic of canine separation anxiety when our dogs have to become accustomed to being left home alone again. Are you ready for this?

SEPARATING DEFINITIONS

Before we discuss whether or not you need to be concerned about this, let’s clear up some definitions. We’ve noticed that the more this issue is discussed, the less precise the language surrounding the condition seems to become!

“Anxiety” is the anticipation of unknown or imagined future dangers. With separation anxiety (SA), your dog anticipates bad things happening because you aren’t there. True SA presents as extremes of behavior: vocalization, destruction of household objects (especially door frames and confinement tools), self-injury, and sometimes soiling in the home by a previously well house-trained dog.

SA is a bit of a misnomer for a lot of canine behavior that frequently gets tagged with the dreaded SA label. There are many canine behaviors that we find problematic that occur exclusively in the owner’s absence. If they do not seem to be anxiety-based, and are relatively easy to manage and modify, we should call them *separation-related behaviors* (SRBs). We’d consider true SA to be a subset of SRBs.

WHAT ARE THE ODDS?

Not all dogs will erupt with SA behaviors if their owners suddenly go back to work. If your dog has always been comfortable being left

alone, she’s likely to be just fine when you go back to work, especially if she’s reasonably confident and well-adjusted.

On the other hand, it’s possible that even if your dog never had SRBs before, she is now so accustomed to your constant proximity that your departure could trigger an unwanted response, whether it’s SA or the emergence of other SRBs. You want to start right now, addressing it sooner rather than later.

Puppies are at greatest risk for SRBs when they are subjected to a sudden change to a home-alone lifestyle. While many new puppy owners take vacations or reduce their work hours in order to spend time with their new pups, we normally counsel new puppy owners to immediately begin a program of gradual separation to prevent SA. But right now, with so many new puppy owners sheltering in place, they may have skipped this important part of a pup’s early learning. Fortunately, it’s not too late to put this program into action!

Have you been working from home for weeks, but will be returning to a worksite soon? If so, check out these tips for preparing your dog – and especially any puppy or recently adopted dog who has never before been left home alone.



Photo © Annaev - Dreamstime.com

IDENTIFY THE BEHAVIOR

With today's easy access to technology, it's fairly simple to determine whether your dog or puppy gets upset when left alone. Set up a cellphone or laptop computer to record video – or, better yet, use an app to link a camera to your phone – so you can see what your dog does in your absence. (Note: If you already know your dog already has SRBs and you know for sure it's SA, you don't need to do this; proceed directly to management and modification sections below.)

Next, initiate your normal departure routine, whether this entails crating your dog, confining her in a room or section of the house, or leaving her loose with full access to the entire house. If she has full access, set up your camera where you think she's most likely to hang out. (You can always do another trial later, if you guessed wrong.)

Now leave the house, following your normal departure routine. You only have to go far enough away that your dog thinks you really left. Watch your dog on your camera (or view the recorded video after you return). If your dog wandered around, then settled on her bed (or the sofa) and dozed off, you're probably home free – although she could wake up and get bored later.

If your dog didn't settle in fairly quickly, watch for signs of anxiety (pacing, panting, whining, barking, howling, digging at doors or windows) or boredom (walking around with purpose, looking for things to get into or chew, such as garbage cans, shoes, pillows, table legs, etc., without any obvious signs of stress).

Keep this first "home alone" session short – say, under 10 minutes. If you are using an app and can observe your dog via a live stream,

return immediately if you can see that your dog is anxious; you don't want to ramp up her stress levels.

If your livestream or video recording reveals that your dog is stressed about your absence, she does have some degree of SA, and you have work to do. If she's doing inappropriate things but doesn't really seem anxious, you *also* have work to do, on the easier end of the SRB range.

MANAGING SRBs

It's much easier to use management for separation-related behaviors that are triggered by boredom or a lack of supervision than those caused by true

separation anxiety. Both prognoses can improve immensely from increased enrichment and exercise. (A tired dog makes for a happy owner!)

Scent work is excellent for tiring most dogs – it's very fulfilling and can easily be done indoors. (For more about teaching your dog games that utilize his nose, see "Everyone Nose That," WDJ September 2019.)

Other options for indoor exercise and

enrichment include playing with a flirt pole (kind of like a toy on a fishing pole), a ball pit, or snuffle mat (a textured mat with kibble or treats buried in the fabric, requiring the dog to sniff and lick to find and eat the food). Good games include round-robin recalls (where two or more people call the dog and reward her for each arrival), indoor fetch, or indoor parkour using household items such as laundry baskets to jump in and out of, broomsticks to jump over, and chairs to crawl under. (For more details, see "Winter Woes and Wags," December 2019.)

Physical management for SRBs may include crates and exercise pens to keep your dog confined and out of trouble, or doors and baby

gates to keep her confined to dog-proofed areas. Of course, if your dog or pup isn't already accustomed to confinement, this means teaching her to love being in a crate or pen. (See "How to Crate-Train Your Puppy," November 2014)

Once trained, keep crating times reasonable; a young pup can last only a couple of hours before needing a bathroom break, and adult dogs, even if they *can* go eight to 10 hours, should also get a break halfway through the day (see "Crate Problems and Great Solutions," October 2017).

Dogs with true SA usually do not crate well. They often panic and can injure themselves badly – even die – in their desperate attempts to escape. If your dog displays anxious body language when you watch the video feed, the management program for your dog will likely need to include medication in addition to modification efforts.

Some veterinarians are unfamiliar with behavior-modification drugs and dosages. You can ask yours to do a phone consult with a veterinary behaviorist, or consult directly with a veterinary behaviorist yourself. You or your vet can find a list of certified veterinary behaviorists at dacvb.org/about/member-directory.

MODIFICATION: HOW TO SEPARATE IN PLACE

Whether you do or do not see evidence of SRBs during the video test, you can use the following procedure to increase the likelihood that your dog or puppy will be fine when you go back to work.

The more anxious your dog is about your departures or absence, the slower you need to take this process. If she starts to become stressed, continue working at that step until she can stay relaxed, or back up to a previous step and work there longer. Your goal is to help her be comfortable when she's separated from you, whether or not you're in the house.

1 Start with your dog resting – on a bed (tethered if necessary), in a crate, in an exercise pen, or behind a

“The more anxious your dog is about your departures or absence, the slower you need to take this process.”

Here's the goal: A dog who is just as relaxed and comfortable with being home alone as she is with humans in the house.

baby gate, with you standing next to her.

2 Tell her “wait,” count to five, feed her a treat.

3 Tell her “wait,” take one step away, return, feed her a treat.

4 Tell her “wait,” take two steps away, return, feed her a treat.

5 Continue increasing the number of steps. Starting at five steps away, sit down in a chair within your dog’s sight and read a book or magazine for a minute or two, increasing the duration of your minutes away with each successful repetition. Continue to increase the duration of your time away from your dog (within her sight) up to 30 minutes, until she calmly rests while you read or talk or otherwise occupy yourself.

6 Continue to increase the distance between you and your dog until you are able to step out of the room without a reaction from your dog. Pause briefly, then immediately return; initially, you will decrease the duration of the time you are away from your dog because you are now out of sight.

7 Set up your camera again. Gradually increase the distance between you and your dog *and* the duration of your stay away from her until your dog stays calm even when you are away for longer periods of time. Add other “leaving cues” into the process, such as opening and closing doors, putting on coats, starting the car, etc. – watching her video the whole time.



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If she starts acting stressed or getting into “trouble” when you leave her, back up and slow down.

As long as your dog was not displaying signs of true separation anxiety, you can also leave her with any kind of enrichment and/or food-dispensing toys to help her stay happy and busy while you are gone. (To make sure these toys help improve your dog’s behavior, rather than increase her anxiety, see “Preventing Food-Toy Fails,” on page 6.) Incorporate these toys into your “separate in place” protocol once you are routinely staying out of her sight for more than several seconds.

Dogs with true SA tend to lose interest in food when they are stressed, so you may not be able to use food toys with them at first, until you eventually get to the point that they are truly calm and relaxed when you are out of sight.

When it’s time for you to go back to work, remember that the more you continue enrichment activities, the easier it will be for your canine pal.

Now go hug your dog (if she likes being hugged) – and stay safe and well! 🐾

Author Pat Miller, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA, is WDJ’s Training Editor. She and her husband live in Fairplay, Maryland, site of her Peaceable Paws training center. Miller is also the author of many books about positive reinforcement training. See “Resources,” page 24, for information on her books and classes for dog owners and trainers.

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CONSUMER
ALERT

Preventing Food-Toy “Fails”

Toys that dispense food are often recommended (even by WDJ!) to help occupy a dog, preventing boredom and anxiety. Here’s how to make sure the toy doesn’t increase his distress.



The Kong was the first chew-resistant toy on the market that was used to contain food in such a way that required the dog to really work to get it. Depending on the filling (kibble held in place with peanut butter, cream cheese, or yogurt? canned food? baby food?) or whether it’s been frozen or melted in a microwave, it may take a dog a lot of licking, chewing, biting, and dropping the toy to get all the food. Or the dog might decide it’s not worth the effort!

There is an ever-widening variety of food-filled puzzles, food-dispensing toys, and “slow feeding” dishes for dogs on the market. Many trainers (and this publication) frequently encourage owners to employ these tools to engage doggie brains and to help dogs occupy their time, especially when home alone. However, not all food-dispensing toys are suitable for all dogs! Some, in fact, might frustrate and annoy your dog – or ratchet up his anxiety. So let’s take a closer look at these tools, in order to help you find some that your dog will unequivocally enjoy.

Be prepared, however: I’m going to discuss some common problems with food toys through the lens of behavior science; it’s going to get mildly technical. But if you don’t want to waste your money on toys that gather dust or get thrown out because you didn’t realize that your dog needed your help to learn how to interact with them successfully, or because the toys had features that made them frustrating or scary to your dog, read on!

BUILDING TOY-PLAY SKILLS

The most common problem with food toys is that the dog doesn’t have the skills to get the food and the owner doesn’t understand how to teach him.

Many food toys come with no instructions for introducing them to the naïve dog. For instance, toys that have a cavity that can be filled with food, such as Kongs, are assumed by most consumers to be easy and fun for dogs to use. The marketing materials lead them to believe this, showing dogs chewing, licking, and batting around full toys to dislodge the food and even playing with empty ones. However, if the toy is initially presented at its most difficult level, which is often what’s shown in advertising and demo videos, many dogs can’t be successful.

The “recipes” found for these toys on the internet are often elaborate and challenging, with fillings solidified by melted cheese or freezing. Special biscuits can be purchased for some toys that can’t be shaken or rolled out and require the dog to crush the whole toy or saturate the food by licking before getting anything out.

When an owner presents a challenge like this to a new puppy, or even an inexperienced, well-fed, or timid adult dog, the animal will often sniff at the toy, perhaps poke it with its nose or lick it for a while, then give up. Then the owner may say, “Well, my dog doesn’t like food toys,” and *also* give up.

Let’s look at what behaviors a dog needs to succeed at using one of these toys. They might include licking, chewing, pushing with the nose, picking up, carrying, dropping, shaking, batting with the paws, or securing the toy with the paws while performing some of the other behaviors. These are normal dog behaviors, but that doesn’t mean that every dog will know how to use them in a given situation. With some more difficult toys, they must be performed in a certain order.

As when training any behavior, owners need to start dogs at a level at which they can easily succeed and experience extremely attractive consequences. The dogs should be able clearly to see, hear, and/or smell the food and get some of it right away. Cavity toys can be filled loosely with small, high-value treats, so that any movement by the dog is likely to immediately produce something the dog loves. The opening can be smeared with peanut butter or meat puree to encourage licking.

The difficulty can then be increased slowly as the dog refines the physical skills to extract the food.

IS THE TOY PUNISHING YOUR DOG?

There can be problems in this area as well, when the consequence of the behavior is either not reinforcing or, worse, scary.

A dog who is used to getting kibble for free in a bowl may not be motivated to dig slightly wetted and frozen kibble out of a toy. He may have the appropriate behavioral skills, but the consequence doesn't merit the effort. This problem is relatively easy to prevent or fix: add some higher-value morsels and start off easier, as described above.

One problem that is not so easily remedied is when an unpleasant consequence comes instead of, or along with, the food. A hard plastic toy may bang against a wall, startling a sound-sensitive dog. (Fortunately, there are a few treat-delivery balls that are made of soft plastic.)

A toy with electronics may beep or ding or move in an unexpected way. If one of these stimuli precedes the delivery of the food, it is the most immediate consequence of the dog's behavior. If it happens regularly, it may come to serve as a conditioned reinforcer, predicting the arrival of food (like a clicker does). Or, worst

case, it may scare the dog so much that he doesn't find the food worth the risk.

Dogs who are sensitive to noises may not recover from this. Some may attempt to get the food without so much motion, and their movements will become careful and inhibited. Some will refuse the toy altogether.

One of my dogs became extremely frightened of the noise that the Manners Minder (a.k.a. the Treat & Train), a remote-controlled treat dispenser, makes when it jams. She initially loved this device and using it actually added value to any treat that was inside. But while most of the time the consequence of her nice behavior was a treat (positive reinforcement), sometimes it was a horrible grinding noise that would cause her to back away wide-eyed and then refuse to return (positive punishment). I've stopped using this device with her until I can take the time to counter-condition her response to that noise.

Take care in selecting toys for sensitive dogs, and experiment with them before giving them to the dog.

CONFLICTING CUES

Here's the technical part. Remember that the smallest units of behavior we can analyze are antecedents (stimuli, events, or parts of the animal's history that set the stage for a behavior), behaviors (anything animals do that can be measured), and consequences (stimuli or events that immediately follow a behavior and influence its future strength).

Behaviors and consequences are often easy to observe, but antecedents can be more subtle. One type of antecedent is a cue: a stimulus or condition that com-

municates to the animal that certain behaviors will be reinforced (or punished). Some toys accidentally present cues that are not in keeping with how they are designed to be used.

For most food toys, the cue that food-seeking behaviors will be reinforced is the presentation of a loaded toy. As the dog interacts with a kibble toy, the sound of the kibble inside the toy becomes a cue as well. Or rather a series of them: The sound of a lot of kibble rattling inside the toy correlates with kibble being delivered more frequently; it predicts a high rate of reinforcement.

As the toy empties, the sound changes, predicting a thinner reinforcement schedule. A similar process occurs with the odor of the food in the toy. When the toy is empty, no kibble is audible and we can assume the kibble odor is greatly diminished. These are cues that tell the dog that reinforcement is not available. The dog learns to stop food seeking.

But we get problems with toys that give confusing signals about when or whether the food is available.

One such toy, the Foobler, is a hard plastic ball that ejects treats when rolled. It contains six rotating food compartments and a timer. One compartment at a time is in a position to release food, and then when the timer goes off, the next compartment rotates into position. The owner can set the timer to control how frequently the compartments rotate; the interval can be as short as 15 minutes and as



The Manners Minder (also sold under the name Treat & Train) was among the first remote-controlled treat-dispensing devices on the market. It enables a handler to deliver treats to a dog at a location that is up to 100 feet away – perfect for certain training applications. However, some dogs are afraid of the devices.



The Foobler



long as 90. Before the compartments rotate, a bell rings to signify that pushing the toy will now pay off.

However, when a compartment empties, the sound of rattling kibble is still present, even though food will not be available until after the next bell. The dog can still smell the food in the toy. With every other food toy an experienced dog has played with, these are cues to continue pushing. There is no cue to let the dog know that the food is now unavailable and that ball pushing will not be reinforced. And because the pushing has been reinforced on an intermittent schedule – meaning sometimes it took one push to eject food, sometimes a few – both with other toys and with this one, the dog will probably persist for some time.

What’s more, when the dog finally perceives that the previously reinforced behavior is no longer working, he may start to go through extinction. Extinction can be an unpleasant process, and its common side effects include frustration and an increase in the variability of behavior. The former we try to avoid when training; the latter is something we can plan for and use when shaping behavior – but that is a procedure that requires careful adjustment of criteria and observation of the dog, and should not be left up to a plastic toy.

Among other reasons, it could be dangerous to the toy. I introduced three dogs to the Foobler. My smallest dog switched to gnawing on it when the active food compartment emptied, and even she was able to do damage. (Another dog decided immediately that the most efficient behavior was to chew the toy apart

to get all the food at once. Although she’s only medium-size herself, she could have dismembered the toy had I not been there to remove it.) These are natural responses from dogs who have learned through reinforcement of many varied behaviors that their goal with a food toy is to do whatever it takes to get all the food out.

So you’ll need to supervise your dog closely to prevent behaviors that are damaging to the Foobler, which makes it less than ideal for one of its intended purposes: spreading food-toy engagement out over the course of a workday for dogs left home alone.

You’ll also want to teach your dog how to use it. A training plan would include teaching the dog that the bell means food is available, and – a more complex task – that when the food stops coming out of the toy, he should wait, for up to 15 minutes, until the bell rings again. Although there is no “training mode” for the toy, you can turn it on and off manually to temporarily shorten the intervals between the opening of compartments and build the association of the bell with food delivery.

Such a plan could address possible frustration with the toy’s reinforcement schedule, but could not be relied upon to prevent a dedicated chewer from taking matters into his own mouth during your absence. We would do well to provide a different toy to dogs who have the ability and inclination to chew hard plastic.

The Pet Tutor is a food- or treat-dispensing tool used by many trainers. A canister holds a supply of treats, which can be dispensed via a remote control for delivering treats to a dog at a distance



Pet Tutor

from the handler, or via a timer. The product’s marketing materials suggest that the timed-delivery of food can be a helpful distraction for dogs who suffer from separation anxiety or isolation distress. And it might – for some dogs. Other dogs may experience the tool in much the same manner as the Foobler: frustrating because they can still see and smell the food inside the product.

Generally, when used to dispense food to a dog who is home alone, the Pet Tutor is either placed on top of a crated dog’s wire crate or on the door of a plastic crate (so it dispenses into the crate), or up on a counter (so the dispensed food falls onto the floor).

The product is designed to resist the explorations of a dog who gets ahold of it somehow, but it won’t hold up to all-day safe-cracking efforts or attention from a really strong chewer. But even if a dog can’t get at it, they can still smell that it’s full of food. For some dogs, that’s not a big deal; for an anxious, food-obsessed dog, this likely wouldn’t be a useful tool in this application.

TOYS REQUIRE SKILLS, TRAINING, SUPERVISION

We need to be careful consumers when we select toys for our dogs. We need to provide toys that are safe and fun for each individual dog, and at times, we also may need to train the dog to use them. We need to watch for fear or undue frustration. For the dog’s safety, we need to closely observe his interactions with a toy before leaving him alone with it.

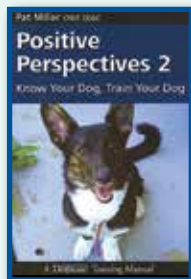
And finally, we may need to take time to teach even an experienced dog about a toy with a rule structure different from the one to which they are accustomed. 🐾

Portions of this article were first published in BARKS from the Guild, Pet Professional Guild’s official publication (10/2014).

Dog trainer Eileen Anderson writes about behavior science, her life with dogs, and training with positive reinforcement on her blog (eileenanddogs.com). See page 24 for contact information.

“Recommended Reading from Whole Dog Journal”

Specially selected books reviewed by WDJ editor



Positive Perspectives 2
Pat Miller

A must-have book that will teach you how to interpret your dog's body language, and show you how to apply it for effective training. Using real-life examples and easy to understand instructions, this information-packed book from world-renowned trainer Pat Miller will have you on the road to better communication with your dog, and faster, easier training.

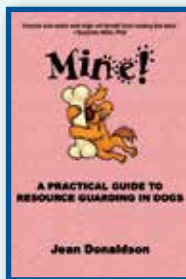
Paperback, 283 Pages, \$21.95



When Pigs Fly!
Jane Killion

Do you have an impossible dog? 90% of dog training is about getting your dog in a frame of mind where he is willing and able to pay attention and learn. Includes over 170 photographs to help you learn the techniques that lead to good behavior. Seasoned trainers should take this book seriously.

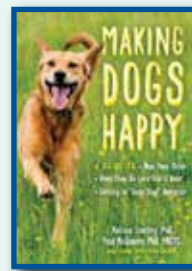
Paperback, 192 Pages, \$17.95



Mine!
Jean Donaldson

A practical how-to guide on resource guarding – food bowl, object, bed, crate, owner, etc. – in dogs. Contents include: aggression basics, nature of resource guarding, kinds of resource guarding, behaviorist vs. medical models, recognizing guarding, prognosis, and more.

Paperback, 102 pages, \$12.95



Making Dogs Happy
Melissa Stirling, PhD &
Paul McGreevy, PhD, MRCVS

“Why does my dog do that?” It’s a question every dog owner has asked—whether their best friend is growling at an unseen foe, or rolling in an objectionable scent. You’ll learn to see the world as your dog does—full of goals to pursue, resources to guard, and stressors to avoid.

Paperback, 288 Pages, \$16.95



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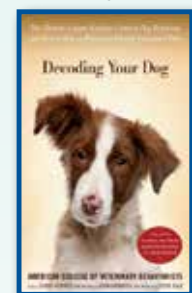
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How Much Should You Feed Your Dog?

Feeding suggestions on product labels are just a starting place; you have to make adjustments.

A year or so ago, I was taking pictures at a “teen dog social,” which was attended by some 6-month-old dogs I had last seen a few months prior. All of the dogs were maturing into well-mannered young adults – but I worried about two of them. Most of the young dogs present were in good condition, but two were absolutely *obese!* How does such a young dog get so fat?

My friends know that overweight dogs are one of my pet peeves. (In fact, I very nearly lost my best friend when, shocked, I blurted, “Oh my gosh, how did Carly get so fat?!” when I hadn’t seen her dog for a long time.)

I’m overweight, myself – but it’s something I control; I am solely responsible for the negative effects that being overweight can have on my health. Our dogs, in contrast, can’t be held responsible for their weight and condition; we alone are at fault when we allow them to get fat and end up with health problems associated with obesity: an increase in cancer, high blood pressure, type II diabetes, kidney disease, osteoarthritis, and more.

Obesity in *young* dogs is even worse: by making dogs carry extra weight on as-yet immature joints and bones with open growth

plates, it predisposes the dog to a much higher risk of painful osteoarthritis later in life. Fat young dogs are also at a higher risk of other orthopedic problems – cranial cruciate ligament (CCL) injuries, in particular.

Given the fact that both of the fat young dogs were Labradors – high-energy goofballs – I felt compelled to mention these risks in particular to their owners. (There she goes again!) This time, I didn’t blurt it out; I was tactful. But even so, both sets of owners were shocked; they knew their pets would mature to be “big” dogs and they thought the bulk was just “puppy fat.”

Here’s the clincher: In their defense, both owners said, “We just feed the suggested amount on the label!”

RECOMMENDED FEEDING GUIDELINES

You don’t have to read to the end of this piece; here’s the most important information to take away from this story: You should *never* feed your dog according to the product’s feeding guidelines *without adjusting the amounts to suit your dog!*

Dog food manufacturers are required by law to put feeding instructions on their labels, to give dog owners a starting point – an idea of approximately how much of the product should be fed to provide “complete and balanced nutrition” to dogs of varying weights. The feeding directions must state, at a minimum, “Feed (weight/unit) of product per (weight) of the dog.”

These numbers are derived through a calculation that estimates the caloric content of the food and factors it against the average, medium-size dog’s “resting energy requirements” (RER), which

This 6-month-old Labrador is overweight. This puts a tremendous strain on his joints and ligaments, setting him up for injuries and osteoarthritis, not to mention a shortened life span.



represents the energy requirement of a dog at rest at a controlled temperature. The accepted formula for calculating a dog's RER is 30 times the dog's body weight in kilograms plus 70. The calculation for a 40-pound (18.14 kg) dog would look like this: $30 \times 18.14 + 70 = 614.2$ calories.

That might seem helpful to know, but be advised that *many* factors can affect a particular dog's RER. Is the dog neutered or spayed? If so, his or her RER will be less. Is the climate very cold? If so, the dog's RER will be more. Inactive dogs and very large dogs have lower caloric requirements, per pound of body weight. Highly active dogs and small dogs need more calories, per pound of body weight, than the average dog.

The dog's age also affects his RER. Did you know that puppies require more calories than adult dogs who weigh the same amount? Puppy foods usually show a more complex table for their feeding instructions, one that shows both the puppy's weight *and* age. Note that the recommended feeding amount goes down as the dog gets older.

So, good feeding instructions will add something like, "Feeding rates should be adjusted based upon breed type, activity, or environmental conditions."

The very *best* feeding instructions will expand even more on this point. Stella & Chewy's label says, "The table below shows the number of measuring cups to feed each day based on a pet's weight. Please note these are guidelines, and individual requirements can vary by +/-50% based on your pet's activity level, metabolism, age, general health, and other factors." Plus or minus 50%!!

GETTING PAST THE STARTING POINT

Now you know: The amounts given are just a starting place. So how should you adjust the feeding suggestions in order to give your dog an appropriate amount?

Research scientists have worked out some formulas so one could conceivably multiply any dog's RER by

The Scoop on Feeding Amounts

- ▶ A measured cup of one food may not contain, by weight, the same amount of food as another measured cup. If the kibble size is very small, the spaces between the nuggets will be smaller, too, resulting in more food by weight in the same volume of space.
- ▶ If you use a coffee cup to scoop and measure your dog's food, be advised that you are likely feeding him more than "one cup" of food; most coffee cups hold more volume than one measuring cup full.
- ▶ Kibble is highly nutrient-dense. Whatever cup or scooper you use, be aware that a rounded, over-full scoop will contain a lot more calories than a level scoop. (This is one of the hazards of asking kids or the most soft-hearted member of the family to feed the dog; they tend to overfill the scoops.)
- ▶ Weighing your dog's portions is more precise than using an approximate volume of food. That said, be advised that the caloric content of foods can vary widely; 8 ounces of this food might contain 280 calories, whereas 8 ounces of that food might contain as much as 500 calories. So when you change foods, check the caloric content, and adjust your dog's portion accordingly.



factors that have calculated for activity and inactivity, cold climates, neuter status, etc. But you don't need to be a mathematician to work this out! All you need are your eyes and hands. Look at and feel your dog!

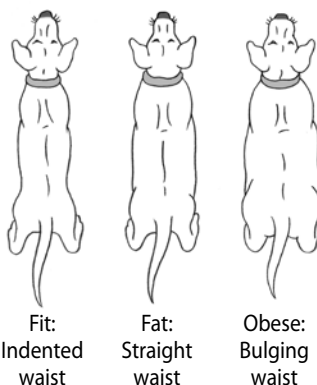
When you look at your standing dog from above, you should be able to see a discernible waist, with an hour-glass indentation between his ribs and his hips. If your dog is super fluffy, you have to feel for this indentation. If he feels like a sausage (a straight

tube) or a lemon (wider in the middle than at the ends), he's fat.

While you've got your hands on your dog, see if you can feel his ribs. Then, take the "knuckle test": Make a loose fist with one hand. Run the fingers of your other hand across the back of the hand with the fist, then over the knuckles, then over the back of your fingers near the knuckles. If your dog's ribs feel like the back of your hand, where you can barely feel the bones, your dog is likely too fat. If your dog's ribs feel like your knuckles, he's likely too thin. If his ribs feel similar to the backs of your fingers near your knuckles, where you can feel each rib but they are slightly padded, he's probably at a good weight.

If you discern that your dog is overweight, reduce the amount of calories that you feed him! And, if you both are able, increase his exercise. That's the super-short version of an article we'll bring you in a future issue on strategies for safe weight-reduction. But if your dog is fat, don't wait to get started: Cut his portion size now! 🐾

View your dog from above when he's standing, focusing on his waist (between the end of his ribs and his hips).



Nancy Kerns is WDJ's editor.



CONSUMER
ALERT

Fostering Harmony

Providing foster care for homeless dogs can help them become healthy and better behaved, increasing their chances of finding a forever home – but you should know what you’re getting into.

Foster puppies! Everyone loves puppies, right? Well, maybe not your achy senior dog ... It's only fair to make sure that your whole family, human and non-human alike, is on board with a foster dog or puppies.

It's a rare dog lover who hasn't at least considered fostering a dog. Woebegone canine faces in shelter and rescue appeals tug at the heartstrings. You could help save a life. And hey, surely there's room in your house for one more dog, especially if it's just temporary...

The recent spread of COVID-19 has animal adoption organizations pleading for even more foster homes for homeless animals. And, fortuitously perhaps, there are a lot of people stuck at home who have the time to foster.

You might think fostering would be easy. You sign up with an organization, they let you know when they have a dog who needs a foster home, you get the dog and take care of her until she's adopted, and then you're ready for your next foster. Easy peasy? Beware, it's way more complicated than that.

If you're thinking of taking the plunge – or even if you already have taken it – here are some things you will want to give serious thought to:

■ **Your household may experience serious disruption.** Some fosters are no bother at all; they blend into the woodwork like they've always been there. More frequently, however, they come with lots of energy and potential for behavior challenges.

The most common reason dogs are given up to shelters (or not reclaimed) is behavior. Make sure you are ready for the impact this may have on your lifestyle and serenity and be prepared to provide a lot of management. The dog may not be house-trained – in fact, you should assume she's not, and start treating any foster dog as if she were a young puppy. (For instructions on remedial house training, see "How to Potty Train a Dog," WDJ July 2018.)

The dog also may search for things to eat or chew in wastepaper baskets and closets and on counters and tables. She may alarm-bark at the dropping of every leaf outside. You never know what you're going to get!

If your own dogs don't do well with new dogs in their home, don't even *think* about fostering dogs. If you have your heart set on fostering, consider other species that your dogs will tolerate. If you have small companion animals and/or children, use extreme caution when bringing a foster dog into your home, until you know they will be safe.

■ **Environmental factors.** It may be that the foster dog needs much more serious



containment than your own dogs do. A yard that's fenced by a cute little three-foot-high picket fence might be perfectly adequate for fostering small or senior dogs, but you probably shouldn't consider a foster hound or other large dog. Before you plan to keep the dog in a crate at night, you should remember that not all dogs are comfortable in crate; he might not tolerate one without a serious counter-conditioning plan (or ever!).

Let the shelter or rescue group know what kind of dogs your home and yard is well set up for, and do your best to decline to take dogs that will push you past your own and your home's limits.

■ **Family buy-in.** Your entire family must be on board with the fostering project. Anger or resentment over a canine intruder can fester and damage human relationships, not to mention result in actual harm to the dog. The entire family needs to be positive about fostering before you bring a dog home.

■ **Financial considerations.** Some shelters and rescues will pay *all* expenses for your foster dog. Others will pay some, while still others expect their foster providers to bear the entire financial burden of fostering. Make sure you are clear about finances before agreeing to foster – and make sure your own finances can weather the cost, if that's the arrangement.

Also note that while some shelters or rescue groups provide food for the animals in their foster homes, the brand of food might not meet the standards for food that you give your own dogs. This puts many foster providers in the position of having to decide whether to feed their foster dogs a food that they consider to be low-quality or foot the bill for a higher-quality food.

■ **Legal considerations.** In today's litigious world, legal considerations must be taken seriously. Does your chosen group's insurance cover you if your foster dog bites someone, or

Support for Fostering

Fostering implies a limited time commitment, a temporary arrangement in which a person agrees to house and take care of the dog until a permanent home can be found. Fostering is not the same as adopting, where you agree to take ownership of the dog on a permanent basis. Of course, sometimes you do end up adopting the dog – what some call a foster failure, but I call a foster success!

My most memorable foster was Mandy, a 6-year-old tri-color Collie surrendered by her owner to the Marin Humane Society many years ago. She was overweight, matted, and had multiple urine burns on her hind legs because she suffered from spay incontinence. A Collie-lover from way back, I agree to foster her. She walked into my house, laid down in front of the fireplace like she'd lived there all her life, never put a paw wrong and never left – a foster success if I ever saw one!



Pat and Mandy in 1990.

Two decades-plus ago, when I was working at the Marin Humane Society in Novato, California, foster homes were a rare commodity – usually reserved for highly adoptable animals with treatable conditions, such as a pregnant mom, a dog with a broken leg that needed to heal, a puppy with a mild respiratory infection. It wasn't even a formal program, usually just a staff member or volunteer taking a special interest in an animal and offering to care for her at home for a while.

My, how the times have changed. Today, fostering has become its own industry. It's the rare shelter that doesn't have some sort of formal foster program, and the majority of rescue groups across the country rely on foster homes for virtually all their dogs. It takes a legion of caring humans to be able to provide foster care for the numbers of dogs (and cats and other companion animals) who need it.

causes some other accident or injury? (Hint: They should.) If not, does your homeowner's insurance cover you? Are you fostering a breed of dog that your insurance might exclude from coverage? Better to know the answers to these questions before there's an incident, rather than find out afterward that you aren't covered.

■ **Foster failures.** People often use the phrase “foster failure” to jokingly refer to a dog they took on as a foster but decided to keep. But *true* foster failures include those where the dog doesn't adapt well to his foster home, where the new family doesn't have the skills or patience to work with his behavior issues, or worse, where the foster ends up not being a good candidate for adoption.

If your home is an unsuitable environment for that particular dog, perhaps there's another foster home that's better suited for him, and another foster dog who is better suited for yours.

An even tougher question: If it becomes evident to the organization you foster for that the dog isn't a good adoption candidate, either for medical or behavioral reasons, can you deal with the strong emotions that are inevitable – and normal – if the organization decides that euthanasia is the appropriate outcome? Even lifetime animal protection professionals struggle with the emotional impact of euthanasia. It's not easy, nor should it be. You should only consider fostering if you are prepared to face this possibility.

■ **Know your limits.** We still live in a world where there are far more dogs than there are homes. You could foster every single dog in your local animal shelter today, and there would be more tomorrow. And the next day. And the next. An increasing number of horrendous hoarder cases are reported in the news weekly, often involving well-intentioned shelters, rescue groups, and foster providers who were unable to stop the impulse to take on “just one more,” even though they lacked the resources to properly care for the animals they already had. Don’t let yourself become one of these.

PARTNERING WITH AN ORGANIZATION

In order to prevent frustration, heartache, and/or financial difficulty, make sure that you carefully select the organization that you’ll be working with. Different groups have varying policies, procedures, and philosophies. Be sure that your philosophies and ethics are aligned with those of the group you choose.

There should be an interview process – where you are interviewing them every bit as much as they are interviewing you. Here are some suggested interview questions to ask your potential fostering organization:

■ **What is your organizational structure?** Is the organization a municipal shelter, a humane society, a breed rescue, or all-breed rescue? This will guide its policies and procedures to some degree. Is it a 501(c)3 non-profit organization (in which case your fostering expenses, including travel, are tax deductible)? If they say it is, look it up here to make sure it is legitimate: apps.irs.gov/app/eos/. If it is a non-profit, who serves on its Board of Directors? If it is municipal, what governmental body oversees it?

■ **What is your organizational mission/philosophy?** They should be able to articulate this – and you will need to decide if it is congruent with your own beliefs. There’s no right answer here; dogs in all kinds

of shelters and rescues benefit from foster programs.

■ **How many animals do you take in per year, and how many get euthanized?** No animal welfare group likes being asked about euthanasia, but you want to work with a group that is honest, ethical, and humane, and you want to know under what circumstances they do choose to euthanize. You can then decide your own comfort level. Some fantastic foster homes are able to deal with the dissonance of loving dogs and fostering for groups that have higher euthanasia rates; others are not. In fact, some choose to work with full-service shelters because those dogs may be at greater risk for euthanasia.

I’d suggest that you ask: How many animals do you take in and how many are euthanized? What conditions or behavior might prompt euthanasia? If you’re told that none of their animals are *ever* euthanized, they are either lying or keeping dogs alive without consideration for quality of life. Even if they are a limited-intake group and don’t do euthanasia themselves (because they take dogs to another group or a veterinarian for the procedure), they should acknowledge that some of their dogs are euthanized. All legitimate groups euthanize sometimes, for health or behavioral reasons, even the “no-kill” groups.

This sounds morbid, but I’d also suggest asking how the group euthanizes the animals they judge to be unadoptable. You don’t need all the details, but be sure they euthanize by intravenous injection (into a vein, not directly into the heart), not by carbon monoxide or decompression chamber, shooting, or worse; these latter methods are not humane, and would indicate that the organization is seriously behind the times.

■ **How much disease do you encounter?** This is more often an issue for shelters that house large numbers of animals at a single location than it is for rescues that have their dogs in foster care, but rescue dogs can get

sick, too. Does the group vaccinate dogs on intake? This is the standard practice in the industry and the best approach to minimizing disease transmission. Upper respiratory infections are the most common, but the more serious, possibly fatal diseases such as parvovirus and distemper also occur.

Bringing foster dogs home means potentially exposing your own dogs to these germs, and risking that they may become ill – perhaps seriously so. The more illness at the shelter, the greater the risk to your dog. Are you willing to take that risk? Who pays for treatment if the foster is ill? Who pays if your dogs become ill?

Will the foster dog be treated for parasites before being sent to your home? This is highly recommended; if your home is flea-free, the last thing you want is having to treat all of your animals because a foster dog arrived covered with fleas.

■ **Do you do behavior assessments?** Despite recent studies that question whether behavior assessments are truly predictive or their results are replicable, good shelters and rescues use *some* kind of evaluation procedure. This is to identify behaviors that might need to be modified (or that may identify the dog as too risky for adoption) and to improve the adoption process by helping to match dogs with appropriate homes (and appropriate foster homes).

Ask if you can observe evaluations being performed and see if you are comfortable with them. If they don’t do some kind of evaluation, consider carefully whether this is a group you want to be involved with and whether you want to take on the additional risks of fostering a dog who hasn’t been evaluated. Even with evaluations, you will inevitably discover additional behaviors when you bring the dog into your home – desirable ones as well as undesirable ones.

■ **Who pays expenses?** Does the organization you are interviewing provide food and veterinary care? Do they reimburse you for those? Or are



HEALTH

Tooth Root Resorption

This puzzling condition can cause your dog to experience significant dental pain and/or tooth loss.

The loss of an incisor (front middle tooth) is easy to notice in a dog like this Boxer with an underbite. But many dogs lose teeth to resorption without their owners ever spotting the loss. Sometimes, though, resorption also causes dental pain, prompting a veterinary exam.

There are many possible causes of dental disease in dogs including plaque accumulation, tooth trauma, genetic predispositions, cavities, and cancerous conditions. In recent years, there has been an increase in the research of canine tooth root resorption – a process in which part or parts of the tooth are destroyed by physiologic processes gone awry – as a cause of dental disease.

Unfortunately, the research has not yet resulted in solid answers as to the cause or effective treatment of tooth root resorption in

dogs. Nevertheless, owners should be aware of the condition so they can bring any abnormality they may observe in their dog's mouth to their veterinarian's attention.

ANATOMY OF A TOOTH PROBLEM

A healthy canine tooth consists of the crown – the part of the tooth above the gumline – and the root, which is below the gumline and makes up the majority of the tooth.

The center of the tooth root is the pulp chamber; this is living tissue filled with nerve endings and blood vessels. Moving outward from the core of the tooth, the next layer is dentin, a hard, bone-like material that protects the pulp. Outside of the dentin, cementum is a thin coating that attaches the tooth to the jaw bone.

Enamel, the white, visible part of the tooth, protects the crown. It is the hardest substance in the body. Once laid down, enamel is no longer produced. Any destruction to enamel is permanent.

Tooth root resorption occurs when a part or parts of the tooth are destroyed. Any area of the tooth can be affected, from the dentin to the enamel.

Odontoclasts are cells that are critical for resorbing tooth tissue. They are usually associated with breakdown of baby tooth roots, so that these teeth can fall out and make way for permanent teeth. For reasons that are not understood, sometimes the supportive “net” of proteins that protect the teeth gets compromised, and odontoclasts can then break down the tooth and surrounding tissues (called the periodontium) without restriction.

The beginning of this breakdown appears as a lesion that looks like a pit or a hole in the tooth. These lesions are often found at the junction where the enamel meets the cementum. If above the gumline, bright pink tissue from the gums (called gingiva) may cover the hole. This is the body's way of trying to heal the defect. If the dog is under



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Odontoclasts are cells that are critical for resorbing tooth tissue. They are usually associated with the breakdown of baby tooth roots, so that these teeth can fall out and make way for permanent teeth, but, interestingly, they don't normally affect the incoming adult teeth. The mechanisms responsible for these mechanisms are not fully understood in dogs.

DO YOU HAVE TO DO ANYTHING ABOUT THIS?

Treatment for this condition remains controversial. In some cases, your veterinarian will suggest only monitoring every six months with dental x-rays. But if discomfort or dysfunction are observed, extraction of the affected tooth is indicated.

In the past, veterinary dental specialists tried filling these resorptive lesions like a dentist would fill a cavity in a human. However, this proved to be a mostly unsuccessful tack; usually, the tooth loss would continue to progress. The filling would fall out and the tooth would have to be extracted after all. If the dog seems to be experiencing discomfort, and/or the loss of the tooth is certain, the tooth should just be extracted.

Unfortunately, there is no known way to prevent tooth resorption, as the causes are not known. However, dogs who have suffered one tooth resorption are prone to more. As a result, close attention to overall dental health is critical throughout your dog's life. If your veterinarian suspects resorptive lesions, then referral to a veterinary dentist may be the best course of action. Canine resorptive lesions are an area of limited knowledge and current research, so speaking with a specialist might be the best bet. 🐾

Catherine Ashe graduated the University of Tennessee College of Veterinary Medicine in 2008. After a small animal intensive emergency internship, she practiced ER medicine for nine years. She works as a relief veterinarian in Asheville, North Carolina and loves the general practice side of medicine.

anesthesia for a dental cleaning, once the tooth is scraped clean, the lesion becomes obvious. However, many of the lesions are below the gumline and will not be seen except through dental x-rays.

There are three basic types of resorptive lesions: physiologic, inflammatory, and non-inflammatory.

Physiologic resorption is normal and occurs as the body prepares to shed the deciduous teeth (baby teeth) as the adult teeth develop and emerge.

Inflammatory and non-inflammatory resorptive lesions are abnormal. The triggers for these types of tooth destruction are unknown. One study found a possible correlation between age and breed, with older, large breed dogs predisposed.

SIGNS

What symptoms might your dog show? This is what makes resorption lesions confusing! There may be no symptoms at all. Resorptive lesions are often found incidentally if your dog has full mouth x-rays before a dental cleaning. (This is one reason that x-rays are such an important part of dental cleaning.) If symptoms are noted, they might include drooling, difficulty chewing, bad breath, mouth pain, and dropping food when chewing.

If a resorptive lesion affects the crown of the tooth, a hole may be seen. It is also possible to see pink fleshy tissue that appears to be growing on the tooth. This is gingival tissue that is trying to cover the defect in the crown. It is a hallmark of a resorptive lesion.



The Play Way

How to use therapeutic play to help shy and fearful dogs gain confidence in themselves and in you.



Professional dog trainer Amy Cook, Ph.D., developed the Play Way after exploring how play therapy is used to help children with social or emotional deficits. She's found play to be a powerful tool for helping shy and fearful dogs learn how to cope better in our world.

Play is a widespread feature of social animals. Humans play. Dogs play. Maybe our shared need for and love of play is part of what strengthens our desire to share our lives with dogs. We play together with toys and invent enjoyable games. Many of us make a point to incorporate toy play and fun interpersonal play into our training programs, offering an exciting bout of tug or an opportunity to retrieve a prized ball in exchange for a correct response to a cue.

Used in a very specific way, play also helps shy and fearful dogs learn to work through and overcome fear and anxiety, often in cases where more traditional positive-reinforcement methods – attempts to counter-condition triggers (“scary things”) with the use of food – have been less successful.

Amy Cook, Ph.D., a Certified Dog Behavior Consultant, has been training dogs for 30 years and has specialized in working

with shy and fearful dogs for the past 20. She first began exploring the therapeutic value of play for shy and fearful dogs as part of her doctoral work in psychology, where she realized the stark differences between therapeutic approaches to addressing fear and anxiety in children and how positive-reinforcement dog trainers typically addressed fear and anxiety in dogs. In exploring therapeutic approaches to traumatized children, Cook wondered if a similar approach might work for dogs.

“It got me thinking,” Cook says. “When we have a traumatized 4-year-old child, what do we do with them? Do we lean on classical conditioning to make new associations? Sure, that can be there, but there’s so much more to pull from in the human therapy model than what we were pulling from with Skinner and Pavlov as dog trainers.” Cook began exploring the many ways child therapy often incorporates playful, fun games and nurturing activities to communicate love, joy, and safety to a traumatized child.

Not long after, Cook formulated the concepts she found most effective for rehabilitating frightened dogs into Play Way.

PLAY WAY PLAY IS DIFFERENT

The Play Way incorporates play in a carefully nuanced manner in order to help shy and fearful dogs overcome their issues in order to live a happier, less-stressed life. But the “play” used in the Play Way is different from what many people likely think of when asked to play with their dog.

“In my system, the dog leads most of the play,” explains Cook. “I may not prod or nag or insist. I may only invite. If the dog responds with, ‘Yeah, I’d love to do that,’ then great. If the dog says, ‘No thank you. I’m busy. I’m sniffing. I’m looking at something,’ that’s okay, too. I want the trainer to communicate her availability to play, but it’s equally important to respect the dog’s answer.”

Cook says that’s the hardest part. Especially in cases where the trainer is used to

aiming for constant engagement during training sessions, eager to call the dog's name or otherwise prod for attention the instant he becomes distracted and looks away.

"We'd never dream of doing that in our interaction with other humans," says Cook. "If you were on the phone and I wanted to talk to you, and you said, 'Give me a second,' I'd need to give you that time. I wouldn't grab the phone, hang it up and say, 'Hey! Hang up the phone! I have money, take it, let's talk!' The Play Way is a lot more about how interactions happen between people. I'm asking handlers to explore this space where the dog gets to decide if they want to do this."

Giving the dog equal footing in the decision-making process is just one key aspect of the Play Way. *How* one plays is the other, along with teaching the dog to "look at and dismiss" potential triggers (this is described in "The Play Way, Step by Step," on page 21).

For most people, the most challenging part of learning the Play Way is learning how to play in this manner. Play Way play is not about overly excited, high-arousal play. It's about developing a consensual, relaxed yet playful interaction between dog and human that gives both parties permission to be silly and simply enjoy the moment. High-energy, aroused play definitely has a place in Cook's toolbox. It's super fun, builds and maintains arousal when needed, and is great for building anticipation and reinforcing trained behaviors. It's just not the goal in the Play Way.

THRESHOLDS

Taking the time to develop a conversational, give-and-take social play relationship is important because in rehabilitating shy and fearful dogs, the dog's ability to engage in this manner serves as a barometer for how a dog is feeling.

Threshold is a phrase that comes up a lot in work with fearful dogs (and dogs who exhibit aggressive behavior, too, which makes sense because a lot of aggression is directly

Success Story: Tessa and Molly

Tessa Romita of Stoneridge, New Jersey, chose a 4-month-old Coonhound puppy, Molly, from her local shelter because she seemed mellow. As she later learned, Molly's outward appearance of "mellow" was masking a very anxious and reactive dog.

Tessa struggled to integrate Molly with her resident dogs. Molly frequently lashed out if they got too close to her or items she perceived as hers. Tessa's resident dogs, all smaller than Molly, were always walking on eggshells, with no real idea how to peacefully coexist with their new canine housemate. Outside the house, Molly was a mix of independent, occasionally confident, and often fearful. Life was a complex maze of management strategies.

Tessa did everything right. She enrolled in a well-respected positive-reinforcement puppy class and diligently tried to help Molly. As Molly transitioned from puppyhood, to adolescence and into adulthood, Tessa continued working with trainers in an attempt to make life less stressful for Molly, and by extension, for the rest of the family. While they made some progress, eventually each of the trainers came to the same conclusion: Things were as good as they were likely to get. There was nothing more to be done. Molly's world would need to be small.

"Then I took Amy's class and it was a game-changer," Tessa says. "I tear up even thinking about how this journey started for us." For Tessa and Molly, strengthening their relationship through therapeutic play was transformational. In giving Molly the space to accept or decline invitations to play, she learned she had a choice, and in being given that choice, her confidence grew. She became more relaxed. "It's so powerful to see how Molly learned she can be out in the world and not need to scan and worry about what could happen; instead, she trusts me and enjoys being out."

The situation even improved between Molly and Tessa's resident dogs. Whereas management used to be a big part of their daily life, the dogs now enjoy loose, relaxed social interaction. "It took time, but it's beautiful. They're friends now," says Tessa.

Molly still has times when she struggles with anxiety, but overall she's more relaxed, more confident, and sometimes even downright silly. "I'll have these random moments where Molly does something she'd never do before, like suddenly go wading through a creek when she used to be afraid of water, or not care about an alarm going off when she'd been painfully sound-sensitive," Tessa says. "I'll email Amy in amazement and her response is always, 'Play is magic.'"



Molly and Tessa enjoy a sweet moment together; their relationship blossomed after Tessa learned how to use therapeutic play to boost Molly's confidence and trust.

Photo courtesy of Tessa Romita



The PLAY WAY with Amy Cook PhD

playwaydogs.com

Social Play is an excellent way for a dog to be in a happy state of mind and to be physically relaxed or loosened up. Playing also lets us know if a dog is truly relaxed or concerned about anything, so we can more effectively help them feel better.

Good play is an **INVITATION**. We invite our dog when they are looking at us, not when they are busy. We don't pressure them, as grabbiness, pushiness, and nagging are a turn-off. Pause and greet again before making a new suggestion. If your dog doesn't take up your suggestion but is still attentive, try something new.

FLIRT! Use SUSPENSE.

Not all play involves touching, but good play will have an element of suspense! Take pauses. Do not rush.

- ✓ Start with slower, softer energy.
- ✓ Give your dog plenty of room to move around freely.
- ✓ Invite, wait, listen to your dog's response (body language)
- ✓ Take "no" as an answer. **PAUSE**. Try something different.
- ✗ Don't make your dog feel trapped or overwhelmed.
- ✗ Don't make your dog wrong.

You want your dog to feel **SAFE** to open up and play with you. If you touch your dog, use the **3-SECOND RULE**. Pull back after 3 seconds, staying engaged. Does your dog come back to you?



Be in your dog's ENERGY RANGE!

What is your dog's energy level?
 If your dog is overexcited (eg, 8) slow down to a 6-7.
 If your dog is unsure or shy (eg, 2) try 1-3.



Play is a **CONVERSATION**. Here are some ideas to develop a "play vocabulary" with your dog:

YOU are the PREDATOR!

- * Stay on the floor
- "Claw" Hands
- Flat Hands
- "Bitey" hands
- "HAR" mouth

YOU are the PREY!

- Hiding face
- Pulling Away
- "Piano Hands"
- Rolling, Flopping over

How is your dog responding?

need to look

If your dog disconnects from you and looks towards something more interesting (that is not too close), let them process the other thing. Don't pressure them to come back to you.

When you let your dog look and dismiss the other thing on their own, the more of their attention that you really have when you get it!

NOPE you are being WEIRD

Shake Off Stress Yawn Busy Sniffing

At first you may get a lot of "Not Now's". If your dog shows confused signals or becomes busy doing other stuff, hold back. (Especially with the "shy" dogs) Your dog may not understand what you are doing.

When they approach you again, check your energy level, greet again, and try something different.

ha ha ha, YES!

BITE YOU! **PANT PANT PANT THAT!**

When you do something that your dog likes, they will keep coming back to you. Their bodies are loose and curved. They may roll around, jump on you, or fake-bite you. They may even laugh!

Now that you know what your dog likes, you can do it over and over again!

traced to fear). Threshold is loosely defined as the moment when a dog crosses from one emotional state to another. In the specific context of fearful dogs, a dog who is *just* "under threshold" is in that emotional sweet spot where he's aware of the presence of the trigger (the "scary thing") but not feeling at all threatened. Once he's tipped into a fearful state ("over threshold"), the fight-or-flight hormones (adrenaline, cortisol) may kick in, making it hard for him to think, learn, remember, and respond like a more "normal" dog.

When working with fearful dogs, the ability to keep the dog sufficiently sub-threshold is paramount to the training success. But keeping a dog under threshold is often easier said than done. Real-world variables can change on a dime, especially if one hasn't gone to great lengths to carefully set up a controlled training session. And a stressed dog is not in the proper mental state to learn he is safe in the presence of the trigger.

"When I first learned about positive reinforcement-based dog training, the general wisdom was that as long as the dog is eating, he's under threshold," says Cook. "That might be a reliable indicator for some dogs, but it's far too unreliable for me with the degree of under threshold I'm aiming for. After all, many dogs can eat or tug on a toy while stressed."

NOT THE USUAL COUNTER-CONDITIONING

Many trainers turn to classical counter-conditioning to help rewire how the dog's brain reacts to scary things. But Cook's method follows more of a human therapeutic model.

Rather than use food in an attempt to reprogram how the dog feels in specific situations, her goal is to help the dog naturally achieve an emotional state where he can comfortably evaluate a situation and come to his own conclusion that there's nothing to worry about. It's similar to how a skilled human therapist guides a person through a healing process in such a way that the client discovers the answers herself.

“It’s about giving the dog the chance to self-soothe from a place of entirely established safety, and where they’re already feeling relaxed. Now they have a chance to gather new information and I don’t have to tell them what specific response they should be having. I’m not saying, ‘You’re right, there’s a stimulus (the scary thing) and now I’m going to give you something (food) to influence you directly.’ Instead, I can say, ‘Go ahead and look at the scary thing and come to the very real conclusion that you are not under threat here.’”

Play helps facilitate the process. Whereas the goal of food centers around changing the dog’s conditioned emotional response (CER) to the trigger, the goal of Play Way play is to help put the learner into a better state of mind from which to fully evaluate the situation and organically realize there is no threat.

WHAT PLAY WAY PLAY LOOKS LIKE

Play Way play is about social, interpersonal play, more so than playing together with toys or using food. What matters most is that the human acknowledges *and* adopts the conversational nature of how dogs play with each other, rather than seek to drive and control the play interaction.

Healthy dog-to-dog play has a natural rhythm. There’s a lot of back and forth. They pause. They hold suspense. They change things up. They don’t much enjoy a play partner who is being pushy. It’s not as much fun to play with someone who insists on picking the game and dictating exactly how it’s played.

“It’s a lot like working with toddlers,” says Cook. “With kids, you don’t get to decide how the game goes. It’s no fun if you decide we have to play Candyland and then you win. Play Way play is about being cooperative, improvising, and letting the dog make suggestions like, ‘I want to do this...’ or ‘I don’t like when you poke my butt with your claw hand, but I do like to play fake bitey-face with you.’”

Try play-bowing at your dog. Hide your face and encourage your dog to

THE PLAY WAY, STEP BY STEP

1 LEARNING THE LANGUAGE OF PLAY WAY PLAY. For most people, this is the most challenging part of the Play Way. This first step focuses on developing a therapeutic play style that allows for relaxed, silly, low-energy, consensual activity, where the dog is given room to say, “No thank you,” “Not right now,” or, “I’d rather do this instead of that.”

2 LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION. Once the dog and handler have come to a mutual understanding about this new style of interaction, make sure it holds up by playing in many new, non-challenging locations, such as different rooms of the house.

3 DEVELOPING “LOOK AND DISMISS” USING SIMPLE DISTRACTIONS. Now it’s time to introduce simple, non-worrisome (trigger-free) distractions. The “look and dismiss” part of the Play Way is about helping the dog realize he can acknowledge potentially “scary things” from a place of safety, realize it’s no big deal, and calmly dismiss the potential trigger. This starts by practicing look and dismiss with simple distractions.

The critical piece of this skill is for you to let the dog control the session; you just open the door to the possibility of play. Let’s assume your dog is initially receptive to the invitation. If she disengages for any reason – say, a blowing leaf catches her attention – let her do so. Pause, wait, and allow her to process the information. When she reorients her attention to you, simply acknowledge her warmly, and then, if her attention is still present, re-issue the calm, casual invitation to play and wait to see how she responds.

This can be tricky, as there’s a great temptation to enthusiastically react to the dog’s choice to re-orient to you by instantly re-engaging in play. But the calm, casual, re-issuing of the invitation to play, and not an enthusiastic, potentially rewarding reaction is a critical element of “look and dismiss” in the Play Way, Cook says. “You want to leave room for the dog to look back at the scary thing if she needs to. Dismissal can come in stages. If you play too quickly, you can overshadow the dog’s natural thought process.”

The Play Way is *not* about teaching the dog to look at triggers and then look back at you in order to earn a reward of play. Cook doesn’t want the dog to be seeking rewards, but instead, to be in a mental state that supports his ability to acknowledge the trigger’s existence and realize it’s not so scary after all, so it can be comfortably dismissed. It’s important to practice this step a lot so the dog becomes well rehearsed in looking, processing, and dismissing – all on his own, without being cued to return attention to the handler.

4 FORMAL TRAINING SET UPS. Once the dog is well practiced at noticing but easily dismissing assorted non-concerning distractions in favor of engaging in therapeutic play, it’s time to introduce slightly more challenging distractions that might be of minor concern, taking care to present them at a very low level.

For example, if a dog is fearful of other dogs, one might use a realistic-looking stuffed dog placed far in the distance. If the dog worries about strange people, a helper might stand far away. Distance is important since, for most dogs, the farther they are from the trigger, the less problematic it is. The goal is for the dog to see the trigger, but to now have the tools – the ability to look and gather information from a place of safety – to process the situation and realize there is no threat. If the dog can’t easily look and dismiss the trigger, that’s key information for the handler, who then aborts the session and creates an easier training scenario next time.

Cook points out these set-ups rely heavily on the handler’s ability to control the environment temporarily in a way that avoids being ambushed by the dog’s trigger. For those everyday situations where one just needs to walk the dog through a neighborhood full of potential triggers, she recommends careful management such as keeping a safe distance from “the scary things,” along with using food in a more traditional positive-reinforcement framework such as consistently feeding in the presence of the trigger, often known as “open bar, closed bar,” to help prevent the rehearsal of unwanted, reactive behavior.

Over time, Cook says clients report a marked decrease in the amount of management needed to navigate everyday, real-world situations. Their dogs might still notice triggers, but find it far easier to dismiss them and move along.

“Dogs get really good at gathering information quickly, and from a place of calm safety, so they aren’t feeling triggered and don’t need to overreact,” she says. “It’s much easier for them to look at people or dogs and it’s like they’re saying, ‘No big deal. I’ve seen that before. We can move on.’”

burrow under your hands to “find” you. Cover yourself with a blanket and do the same. Start with slow, soft energy and give your dog plenty of room to move around. Try to *exude* affection. Flirt! When you touch the dog, pull back and invite her to come toward you. Don’t be afraid to try new things, but don’t frantically switch from one behavior to another. Float an idea and see what happens. If your dog is used to interactive toy play or frequent training sessions, he might be confused and need time (over several short sessions) to figure out what’s going on.

PLAY WAY ADVANTAGES

According to Cook, one of the biggest advantages of the Play Way method is its ability to keep handlers honest about whether or not the dog is under threshold. That’s because many food-motivated dogs will still eat and some toy-motivated dogs can still enthusiastically tug even though anxiety is creeping in. In contrast, social play

(as practiced in the Play Way) is far more fragile. Social play is the first thing to go when stress starts to creep in, says Cook.

“It’s not very robust,” Cook says. “The second a dog starts to have even a mild concern – or even a curiosity that might lead to a concern – the play stops. When that happens, you as a trainer have a clear indication of something you need to pay attention to and potentially adjust. It keeps the trainer honest about staying under threshold.

“I like things that help me counter my own biases and weaknesses as a human being,” Cook continues. “When you’re trying to get something done, you might be tempted to tell yourself it’s okay, the dog’s fine if he’s eating or tugging. I find this type of social play keeps me really honest in my assessments.”

The ability to maintain a high degree of accuracy regarding the dog’s thresholds can lead to faster results compared to traditional classical

counter-conditioning protocols. It’s a heavily front-loaded effort that pays off in the end. By taking the time to slowly develop a wholly consensual, give-and-take play relationship with a dog, you gain the ability to use social play for therapeutic purposes. And in using social play therapeutically, you’re less likely to accidentally push the dog over threshold.

Also, by preventing the dog from going over threshold, he’s more likely to take consistent steps in the right direction, instead of setbacks continually causing him to take two steps forward and three steps back.

MUTUALLY RESPECTFUL TRAINING

Here’s an aspect of play therapy that is less commonly seen in other dog training methodologies: Being “present” – sensitive and respectful of the dog’s needs – is an integral component of the Play Way.

“It’s not about coming in with a plan and saying, ‘I’m going to make this specific thing happen to influence you to feel a certain way,’” Cook explains. “I’m sensitive and listening to my learner. It enriches all of my training to consider a space where I’m respectful of the viewpoint of my dog. I don’t think that’s something we emphasize enough in dog training.”

That’s not to say Cook suggests dogs should call the shots all the time; she knows that’s not realistic. But setting aside time to develop social play is also beneficial as an overall stress release for both shy and fearful dogs and their owners.

“Reactive dogs, shy dogs, fearful dogs – they all live a more inherently stressful life,” Cook says. “It’s hard to be routinely triggered by stressful things. We all need play, silliness, and laughter to help shake-off these types of stressful build-ups. I think, in general, we don’t really do enough to relax the dogs who spend a decent amount of time feeling an overabundance of stress compared to a more adjusted dog.”

In this way, the Play Way method can be just as beneficial to the dog and owner as a team as it is in its abil-

Different From Classical Conditioning

People often mistakenly refer to the Play Way as a classical conditioning set-up that uses social play in place of food to help change how a dog feels about the “scary thing.” But Cook says that’s not entirely correct. A common approach used by positive trainers working with shy and fearful dogs is to strategically offer food or toys – something the dog readily enjoys – anytime the trigger (the “scary thing”) is present, so that the dog comes to associate the scary thing with the availability of food or toys, and the newly formed association reduces the degree of concern. This is called classical counter-conditioning and it frequently works wonders.

However, with the Play Way, says Cook, “I’m specifically working to avoid a situation where the dog looks at the scary thing and then instantly play happens. Instead, I’m using play to facilitate the dog’s ability to be in a relaxed, happy state where he can comfortably assess a situation and decide for himself that he’s safe. I know Pavlov is always on your shoulder, but the focus of the Play Way is not to drive the purposeful formation of specific associations. I’m actively trying to not contribute, as a trainer, to the associations being made by the dog.”

For more information about the Play Way, visit playwaydogs.com or check out Cook’s online course, “Dealing with the Bogeyman – Helping Fearful Reactive and Stressed Dogs,” offered via Fenzi Dog Sports Academy, fdsa.com.

ity to help the dog organically work through its fears.

“When you own a fearful or reactive dog, you yourself are often stressed,” says Cook. “You’re nervous your dog will blow up at any time, and you’re worried what people will think. Maybe you’re even grieving a little bit because this isn’t what you pictured when you thought about getting a dog.

“I think it helps the human, the dog, *and* the partnership to have this one expectation-free space – this isolated time where you only focus on what you both can do right, where you make each other laugh and enjoy being silly together. That kind of connection can help keep you invested for the long haul in helping your dog. It can recharge the batteries in the relationship.”

As Cook always says, it’s magic! 🐾

Stephanie Colman is a writer and dog trainer in Southern California. She works in the puppy department at Guide Dogs of America, helping to recruit and manage volunteer puppy raisers.

Photo courtesy of Susanne Handwerk



Success Stories: Susanne and Cash

Five-year-old Cash, a Belgian Tervuren has always been a “special dog with special needs,” explains Susanne Handwerk of Eichgraben, Austria. Susanne says he used to be anxious about strangers, leery of other dogs, and on high alert when he was away from home. Also, he’s not very food- or toy-motivated, so traditional management techniques involving food or toys are of little help. Many facets of life with Cash had become “frustrating and exhausting” for Susanne.



Photo courtesy of Susanne Handwerk

Finding Fenzi Dog Sports Academy and Cook’s “Dealing with the Bogeyman – Helping Fearful, Reactive, and Stressed Dogs” class changed how Susanne approached training with Cash. Whereas prior trainers insisted she work to make toys more valuable to Cash, learning the Play Way taught her how to develop new games they could enjoy together. The class also helped her better understand thresholds, and the importance of keeping Cash under threshold.

“Now I realize Cash was over-threshold much of the time,” Susanne says. “And because he was so stressed, he was sleeping most of the time at home. Everybody told me that was a good thing, but now I know it wasn’t. He was exhausted. That’s no way to live.”

Taking the time to develop a therapeutic play relationship helped Cash relax. “It helped him become less serious and to worry less,” Susanne says. “And I think it was helpful for him to realize I would listen to his signals – that a, ‘No’ would be, ‘No.’ In the beginning, he ignored most of my invitations to play, but the more I respected his answers of, ‘No,’ the more he was ready to play with me.”

Susanne says Cook’s class was life-changing in teaching her how to help Cash learn to trust her as his partner, develop confidence and become resilient. While he still has some challenges, he’s quicker to acclimate to new environment, can successfully work around other dogs most of the time, and generally ignores strangers.

“The Play Way helped Cash lighten up and learn I would listen to him and support him,” Susanne says. “And it helped me lighten up because I feel like I’m able to help him.”

Susanne says learning Cook’s Play Way method has helped her become a better partner for Cash. Through social play with Susanne, Cash has learned to relax in many situations that used to cause him great anxiety.

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