

Homeward Bound Golden Retriever Rescue

Golden Rule Training



Exercising Your Dog's Mind

Dogs are happier and healthier if they receive mental stimulation on a daily basis. Especially for high-energy dogs, this is an important addition. It does not necessarily require more time, it can be provided as part of the dog's daily training and exercise. Exercising your dog's mind by combining games and training to stimulate his mind will help him stay sharp.

Adding Training to the Daily Routine

Teaching Tricks/Obedience: Teach the dog a number of silly tricks and functional obedience behaviors, such as "sit", "sit-stay", "heel", "wait" at the door, etc. Ask the dog to do them throughout the day when they want something like petting, going outside, leash walks, ball or retrieval games. Teach a variety so that you can ask for different things, always keeping the dog guessing what's next.

Taking an Obedience Class: Group classes such as obedience, agility, fly ball, tracking or any other type of regular training class are great for you and your dog to build a strong relationship! Even if you don't need to "learn" anything, your dog will get immense mental stimulation from the activity. This in turn will exhaust him which will make him a happy and well-balanced dog.

Clicker Training: Using a clicker to train your dog is a different method, but can still be used while on a walk or playing games at home. Training your dog to offer behaviors using clicker training is a superb way to offer mental stimulation as well. A 5-minute clicker session is a good way to burn some excess energy!

Training Games Using a Clicker

Training games can help your dog exercise mentally. Instead of focusing on simple obedience, train for behaviors that require the dog to make intelligent choices in order to get a reward. For example, try the training game "101 Things to Do with A Box." Your dog will need to understand clicker training already in order to play this game.

Find a large box and set it on the floor and sit nearby with a clicker and treats. If your dog takes notice of the box in any way, click and give a treat. Any interaction with the box should earn a small treat. Give a big reward and lots of praise if the dog

thinks of something particularly interesting to do with the box, like climbing into it or pushing it along the floor.

Once the dog understands that interacting with the box earns a reward, try clicking interaction with the box, but not clicking the same two actions twice in a row. Your dog will learn that it must do something different with the box each time it wants a reward. This can lead to some really innovative behaviors.

You can use the same basic steps to teach your dog to interact with various household objects. Any training game that requires the dog to make choices and learn a set of rules will be good mental exercise. You can try training scent discrimination (the dog must pick the object with your scent from a group of similar objects) or object differentiation (the dog learns the names of several objects).

Another fun training game involves clicking and rewarding whatever the dog does and then clicking and rewarding the next behavior only if it is different from the first. Like the advanced version of the box game, this encourages creativity from the dog.

Stimulating the Senses

One great way to help a dog exercise his or her mind is to stimulate all five senses with new experiences. Remember that dogs have a keen sense of smell. Strong smells are not necessary in order to expose the dog to a new scent.

Stimulate the sense of smell by presenting a scent that the dog is not familiar with, such as, a stick air freshener and taking its lid off in the same room as the dog. Bring it closer until your dog seems to notice the smell.

To stimulate your dog's sense of touch, try giving a gentle massage. Place your hand lightly on the dog's side and make small clockwise circles. Repeat this all over the dog's body, remaining gentle. Stop if you seem to be causing pain or discomfort. You can also try gently stroking and rubbing your dog's paws, tail, gums and ears. These areas are rarely touched in daily interaction.

Hearing can be stimulated with new and unusual sounds or simply by talking to your dog. You can use classical music, or nature sounds, such as whale songs. There is a website called "Through a Dog's Ear" that has wonderful CDs to help curb some behaviors. Watch to see if your dog reacts.

Dogs do see colors; however, they don't see the full range of colors as we do. In fact, they mainly see the color blue. Try stimulating the sense of sight by showing your dog a bright blue object and see if there is more of a reaction.

Every dog owner knows how important it is to provide their companion daily exercise. However, all dogs crave mental stimulation too, and if they don't get enough it can turn to destructive behavior!

It's estimated that a dog's mental capacity is roughly equivalent to a child between the ages of two and five. Dogs are quite capable of learning, problem solving and recognizing patterns. According to veterinary behaviorist Laurie Bergman, VMD,

DACVB, "Most of them are capable of thinking about a lot more than we give them credit for."

Providing your dog with challenging brain games and mental exercise will deflect boredom and keep their canine mind sharp. It also strengthens the owner-animal bond in the process. All three of these things are an integral part of keeping your dog healthy and happy. Below are some ways to exercise your dog's mind.

Teach Your Dog Basic Commands and Tricks

Learning and practicing basic commands is a great way to engage the canine brain. As an added bonus, the end result will be an obedient, well trained dog that is welcome at the dog park, in your community and at businesses that allow dogs. Basic commands to teach your dog include sit, stay, come, heel, drop it, leave it, wait, no and down.

Once your dog has learned basic commands, you can move on to teaching tricks. It's much easier to teach your dog tricks if he's familiar with basic commands. You could start with "shake", "roll over", "high-five", "fetch", etc.

Teach Your Dog Names of Objects

Your dog can learn the names of his favorite toys and treats, his bed, even other family pets and the people he loves! For example, if he has a stuffed monkey, name it and hold it in your hand repeating the name. You could teach them the name of a toy, and then work on how to put it away!

You can use the named toys and objects and start playing a game of hide-and-seek. "Where's the monkey?" Just hide the items around your house or yard and then ask your dog to retrieve them one by one. This is a great way to exercise your dog's mind and he'll get lots of physical exercise as well!

Food Puzzle Toys

There are many different toys available now that make your dog work for his treat, such as those that require problem solving and creative thinking to release the food reward. There are large plastic balls that you can put kibble in and the dog has to roll it with his nose and the ball releases the food or treats. These are a perfect way to provide some mental stimulation for your dog. You can also use the food-related brain-freeze game by freezing food or toys inside small blocks of ice so that your dog has to work to release them.

Have Dog will Travel:

Take your dog with you when you go places. Need to return movies? Take the dog along if the weather permits you to safely leave him in the car for 5 minutes. Return

your movies, then get the dog out for 5 minutes and walk him around the parking lot. Every outing you can allow your dog to enjoy is mental stimulation, even if it's just for 5 minutes!

Take the dog along and have him do a sit-stay in the room while you get your money from the ATM. Checking your mail? Take the dog along, and do some trick practice outside the post office. You can add immense amounts of mental stimulation just by allowing the dog to accompany you wherever you go.

Even if you don't take him out of the car, the trip itself is fun and exciting and offers all kinds of new sights, sounds, smells, and experiences. Plus he gets to be with you. Simply starting to include the dog in your life on an everyday basis outside of the home environment will make a big difference.

Kibble Hunting:

Take his kibble for dinner and go outside with him. Throw the kibble into the grassy area, making sure to spread it as far as possible. Hang out with your dog as he searched for his food, it's another form of a hide-and-seek game.

Dog Friends: Find a friend who has a nice dog, and arrange for a 30-60 minute play date once a week. You can also take walks together in a different neighborhood, so the dogs have a new adventure. It is good to keep your dog socialized with other dogs and this is also a good way to accomplish that as well!

Retrieval games: If your dog likes to play ball or Frisbee, add some mental stimulation by doing some obedience training; for example, when your dog comes back with the ball have him "drop it", then ask him to "sit", release him and throw the ball to start the game again. You can throw the ball sideways, out front, backwards, and straight up in the air, long, short, just keeps the dog guessing.

Busy walks:

Take your dog to a busy area and hang out for 15 minutes: a large parking lot, a softball game, a town fair, any outdoor event works well. If you live in an area where there is a large pet store that allows dogs to enter this will aid in his socialization skills. The sights, smells, and interaction with people are all new and interesting items for the dog to take in and will mentally exhaust the dog. If your dog is anxious in environments such as this, please start remedial socialization and use less challenging environments at first. One idea is to go to a coffee store (such as *Starbucks*) and sit outside as people walk by. This is a good way to socialize a shy dog.

Note: Call some stores in your area and ask if dogs are welcome. Even some home improvement stores are open to having dogs visit!

Crate/Bed Surprise:

If your dog can be relied on not to chew towels, this is a fun method that not only allows the dog to have fun hunting his food, but also can be used to get a dog happier being in a crate.

Take dog out of the room and place 5 large bath towels in messy layers in his crate or on his bed. Within the messy layers, hide his kibbles and a few tasty (but dry or semi-soft) treats. Bring dog back into room and allow him to discover the treasure trove on his own (don't point him at it, that's too easy!), and watch as he systematically paws through the bath towels to find every last morsel.

Toys to Simulate a Natural Dog Behavior, Chewing

Dogs are pre-programmed to work very hard and be very excited about food.



Use a KONG as meal replacements.

Note: HBGRR recommends feeding your dog twice a day, approximately 1 cup of food for each meal.

If using this to feed your dog when you want to stimulate his brain, he will work hard to get the food out. The KONG is as difficult as a crossword puzzle or a math problem! After he's done, he will shake himself, lie down and probably sleep. This is high-level mental entertainment! Even a very young puppy can easily dissect the beginner-level KONG described below.

We also stuff KONGs with peanut butter, cream cheese, bits of chicken/cheese/steak, even plain canned pumpkin (usually used for overweight dogs).

Note: KONG brand toys are dishwasher-safe.

Rawhide: Rawhide is a favorite of most dogs and can be used to provide mental entertainment. However, care must be taken to supervise the dog when chewing on rawhide; we recommend the pressed rawhide as it is a safer product and can be found at most pet supply stores.

Deer antler chews are another alternative. They are natural, healthy, odor-free and long-lasting chew toys that will help keep your dog busy and out of trouble and will help to keep his teeth clean. The chewing action grinds the antler down slowly. They are a healthy alternative as they contain many beneficial nutrients and nothing artificial.

Note: Safe Chewing Hint: When giving your dog any chew toy we recommend supervising your dog. Do not allow your dog to attempt to break the chew in half with

his back teeth. Do not allow your dog to consume more than 1/2" to 1" per day. Just as any other treat he may be possessive of, take the antler away from your dog (if he doesn't know "drop it"), you can trade him for a tasty treat such as a piece of meat or cheese.

Dogs are happier and healthier if they receive mental stimulation on a daily basis. This can generally be provided as part of the dog's daily training and exercise. If your dog can't exercise normally, using games and training to exercise his will help him stay sharp.

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