



Dog Toys and How to Use Them

Many behavior problems in dogs are the result of boredom or excess energy. Toys offer mental and physical stimulation which are important to keep your dog healthy and happy. Directing your dog's energy into play with toys can prevent (or help resolve) problems such as digging and chewing. Below are a few types of toys we recommend and how to use them.

Interactive Toys:

These are toys that require your participation!

Fetch toys – many dogs enjoy chasing balls and Frisbees®. Oddly shaped rubber toys (such as Kongs®) bounce erratically and make the game more fun. Flying disks come in many shapes and sizes, including soft versions that are easier on the dog's mouth. Devices for throwing the ball (like the Chuck-It) increase the distance the dog must run to get the toy.

Rope toys - such as Tire Biter® toys are good for tugging.

Food Delivery Toys:

- Designed to be used with kibble or small treats, the dog must manipulate the toy with his mouth and/or paws to get the food to fall out. Some examples are: Buster Cube®, TreatStik®, Tug-a-Jug®, Kibble Nibble® and Everlasting Fun Ball®.

Chew Toys:

- Hard rubber toys that are hollow with holes at both ends, such as Kongs, are good chew toys. To make these toys more attractive, they can be filled with kibble or treats. You can also encourage chewing by putting a small amount of peanut butter or cream cheese inside the toy.
- Dental chew toys are hard toys that the dog can gnaw on and safely ingest small particles. Examples include: Greenies®, bully sticks, and Petrodex® dental chews. You should watch your dog to make sure he does not break off and ingest large pieces of these toys.
- Chew challenge toys are toys that make an edible chew more challenging for the dog to consume. Examples include Funny Bones®, the Kong Goodie Bone®, and the Everlasting Treat Ball®.

Puzzle Toys:

- Food puzzle toys require the dog to solve a puzzle in order to get treats. Examples are the Nina Ottoson® line of dog toys including the Dog Spinny® and the Dog Brick®.
- Toy Puzzle toys require the dog to solve a puzzle to get to a toy. Examples are the Kygen® line of toys, including the IQube®, Intellibone®, and Hide-a-Bee®.

Comfort Toys:

- Soft stuffed toys are good for several purposes but are not appropriate for all dogs. For some dogs, the stuffed toy should be small enough to carry around. For dogs that want to shake or “kill” the toy, it should be the size that “prey” would be for that size dog (mouse-size, rabbit-size or duck-size).
- Remember that de-stuffing the toy is enrichment for your dog! If you find your dog goes through these types of toys quickly, you may want to buy them from the dollar store or repair them yourself.

Getting the Most Out Of Toys

- Many of your dog’s toys should be interactive. Interactive play is very important for your dog because he needs active “people time.” By focusing on a specific task, like repeatedly returning a ball, Kong© or Frisbee, or playing “hide-and-seek” with treats or toys, your dog can expend pent-up mental and physical energy in a limited amount of time and space. This greatly reduces stress due to confinement, isolation, and/or boredom. For young, high-energy dogs, interactive play also offers an opportunity for socialization and helps them learn about appropriate and inappropriate behavior, such as jumping up or being mouthy.
- Provide toys that offer a variety of uses—at least one toy to carry, one to “kill,” one to roll, and one to “baby.”
- Rotate your dog’s toys weekly by making only four or five toys available at a time. Keep a variety of types easily accessible. If your dog has a favorite comfort toy, like a soft “baby,” you should probably leave it out all the time.
- “Hide-and-Seek” is a fun game for dogs to play. “Found” toys are often much more attractive. Making an interactive game out of finding toys or treats is a good rainy-day activity for your dog, using up energy without the need for a lot of space. For example, scattering a handful of kibble in the grass or on a patterned carpet will require your dog to use his nose to find the food.

Safety

There are many factors that contribute to the safety or danger of a toy. Many of those factors are dependent upon your dog’s size, activity level and play style. Although we cannot guarantee your dog’s enthusiasm or his safety with any specific toy, we can offer the following guidelines:

- Toys should be appropriate for your dog’s current size. Balls and other toys that are too small can be easily swallowed or become lodged in your dog’s mouth or throat.
- Avoid or alter any toys that are not “dog-proof” by removing ribbons, strings, eyes or other parts that could be chewed off and ingested.
- Monitor your dog’s toys and discard any toy that starts to break into pieces or has pieces torn off.

- Ask your veterinarian about the safety of items like bones, hooves, pig's ears, and rawhides. Hard rubber toys are safer and last longer.
- Take note of any toy that contains a "squeaker" buried in its center. Your dog may feel that he must find and destroy the squeak source and could ingest it. Squeaky toys should be given only under supervision if your dog has a habit of ingesting toys.
- Know your dog's chewing habits before leaving him alone with any toy. For example, some dogs will carry a plush toy around for years. Others will enjoy "disemboweling" the toy by pulling all the stuffing out but will then lose interest. Others may chew it apart and ingest the pieces, creating a safety hazard for that dog.
- You may notice your dog becomes protective of certain toys. He may get very tense, growl, bare his teeth, air snap, or bite when you reach towards the toy or try to take it away. If you notice these behaviors, do not punish them. Remain calm and give your pup some space. If you need to pick up the toy right away, toss high value treats away from the toy and let him chase after them. When he isn't looking, pick up the toy quickly and walk away. In the future, you may choose to only give these special toys to your dog when he is in a separate room or crate, or you may choose not to give him these types of toys at all. Remember that this behavior is completely normal and punishment will only make it worse.