

## 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 and enrichment. Directing your dog's energy into play with toys can prevent or help resolve such problems as digging and chewing on furniture, shoes or shrubbery.

### Toys We Recommend

**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. And devices for throwing the ball increase the distance the dog must run to get the toy.

▶ Rope toys, such as Tire Biter® toys, are good for tugging. See note below on playing tug-of-war with your dog.

**Distraction Toys:** These are toys that keep your dog busy when you don't have the time to play:

▶ *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®, bullie 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 chewy 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).
- Dirty laundry, like an old T-shirt, pillowcase, towel or blanket, can be very comforting to a dog, especially if it smells like you! Be forewarned that the item could be destroyed by industrious fluffing, carrying and nosing.

### Getting The Most Out Of Toys

- 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.
- Provide toys that offer a variety of uses - at least one toy to carry, one to "kill," one to roll and one to "baby."
- "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.

- 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 and untrained 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.

### **Tug of War**

Tug of war has long been thought to be an absolute "don't" in many dog-owning households. However, by taking a few precautions and setting some basic rules it can be a fun game for you and your dog.

- Choose a toy that will be reserved exclusively for this particular activity. This will help prevent your dog from grabbing and tugging anything you have in your hand.
- Teach two commands:
  - o "Let's tug" begins the game. Never allow the dog to initiate tug on his own and always use your starting phrase when you begin the game.
  - o "Give" or "Out" ends the game. Teach your dog to release the toy by offering a treat or better toy in exchange. Do not start playing tug with your dog until he is consistently releasing the toy on command.

### **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. Very 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, in which case squeaking toys should be given only under supervision.
- 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. Still others will chew it apart and ingest the pieces, creating a safety hazard for that dog.