

How to Avoid Behavioral Issues: Keeping Your Dog Busy

By Kim Downing

Behavioral Issues

Many of the most common behavioral issues that are presented to a trainer can often stem from a dog that is just lacking something to do. Some of these common behavioral issues include:

Hyperactivity

Destructive chewing

Digging

Excessive barking

Neurotic behaviors like biting, licking, and tail chasing

Excessive jumping on people

The reason that these behaviors come out is because dogs have to expend the energy in them in some way. If you don't do it for them with activities you like, the dog will vent it out in other ways that you may find more inappropriate.

For example, think of a young child. Have you ever spent time with a 3-5 year old and been trying to figure out what to do when it's been raining for days on end? You can't go outside to play, and if you don't come up with really good activities indoors, the child will become very wound up from lack of stimulation.

The same goes for dogs. They naturally need things to do, both physically and mentally. Without those outlets, watch out! This is particularly true of puppies and young dogs as well as dogs that are simply more energetic by nature.

A busy dog is a happy dog. It's up to you to keep your dog busy.

Exercise is the easiest way to burn off energy for your dog. Your dog should engage in an appropriate level of exercise everyday (and this doesn't just mean sitting in the backyard all day).

In addition to exercise, there are a variety of other things you can do. Here are some suggestions:

Food stuffable toys are an excellent thing to use with a dog. You don't have to just use the little biscuits that are sold for these toys. Be more creative, and it saves money and your dog likes it better....plus, the toy lasts longer!

There are a variety of food stuffable toys available to you now. The Kong toy is the classic one. There are lots of options available with this:

- Lightly smear the inside with peanut butter.

- Fill up the Kong with kibble and plug the top with a spoon of canned dog food.
- Plug the hole in the bottom with a soft, squishable dog treat. Then fill up with a mixture of canned food and water. Freeze until firm. Creates a popsicle kind of treat. You can also freeze other mixtures in there too of your own creation.
- Try stuffing the Kong with a variety of things. You can use just about anything. How about small bits of fruit or veggies (like apples, carrots, green beans, sweet potatoes, etc.) mixed with cottage cheese, yogurt, or canned dog food?

Keep a couple of these on hand, pre-stuffed and ready to go, and then you have an easy access item for your dog.

Kibble/Treat Dispenser Toys: Another great activity for your dog is to have a few kibble dispenser toys. While these can be filled up with treats, the better use is to fill them with kibble. Then, instead of feeding your dog out of a bowl, try giving him a couple of these to play with. This encourages him to move the toy around, figure out how to get dinner, and really 'hunt' for his dinner. A couple of my favorites are the Buster Cube and the Kibble Nibble, but there are many currently available.

Puzzle Toys: Take a look at some of the puzzle toys now available. Small treats and food can be hidden in compartments that the dog must figure out how to get. These are good for very food motivated dogs, and it allows a supervised activity between you and the dog.

Interesting Activities: Figure out what your dog likes to do that is fun and can be added to the exercise bin alongside walking. This could be using dog safe bubbles in a bubble blowing machine or purchasing a flirt pole toy to do interactive play. It could be hiding your dog's toys and playing a Find the Toy game. These are all fun things to do that keep him busy but include you as part of the package.

Training: It goes without saying that nothing keeps your dog busy like training him. Training is a bonding experience between you and the dog so it's really a relationship builder too. It doesn't matter if you're working on basic skills, trick training, or working towards a sport. It's all good!