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PLAY AND EXERCISE IN DOGS

Why are play and exercise important?

Play with owners and with other dogs, not only provides the dog with some of its exercise requirements, but also helps to meet social needs. Insufficient exercise can contribute to problem behaviors including destructiveness (chewing and digging), investigative behavior (garbage raiding), hyperactivity, unruliness, excitability, attention-getting behaviors, and even some forms of barking. It is especially important to ensure that a dog's need for exercise has been met prior to leaving the dog alone at home and prior to lengthy crating or confinement sessions.

What are good ways to play with and exercise my puppy?

Taking your dog for a walk is a good way to accomplish exercise and can be enjoyable and healthy for you as well. From an early age you should acclimate your puppy to a collar and leash. A flat nylon or leather collar is fine. Keep your puppy away from stray dogs and neighborhood parks until all vaccinations are finished. Practice your walking skills in your own yard first. Put your puppy on leash, and with your voice and a small tug, or perhaps a food or toy reward as a prompt, encourage it to follow you. Reward the good behavior with praise. Keep initial walks short to encourage compliance.

Playing with your pet is an enjoyable activity for both of you. Not only does the puppy get exercise, but positive interactions take place. Training sessions are also an excellent way to gain owner leadership and control, while providing interaction between you and your pet.

How much exercise and play is appropriate?

Selecting an appropriate amount and type of play and exercise, will depend firstly on the type of dog. Puppies and even adult dogs from breeds that have been bred for their stamina or to do "work" often have higher exercise requirements. For purebred dogs, consider their traditional work when deciding the type and amount of play to provide. For example, the retrieving breeds do best with lengthy games of fetch or "Frisbee", while the sledding breeds might prefer pulling carts, or running or jogging with an active owner.

The length and type of play and exercise for your dog will depend on its behavioral requirements and health limitations. While some dogs may still be ready for more after a 5 mile jog and a game of fetch, others may be tired and satisfied after a short walk around the block.

When you are out, or you are busy at home with other activities and responsibilities, it would be ideal for your dog to be relaxed and sleeping, but this will not always be the case. Exploring the environment, stealing food items, raiding garbage cans, chewing or digging, are just a few of the ways that dogs will find to keep themselves occupied. Therefore when you are certain that you have provided your dog with sufficient play and interactive exercise, and you must leave your dog alone, provide sufficient toys and distractions to keep your dog occupied and confine your pet to a safe, dog-proofed area. Some dogs do best when housed with another dog for play and companionship. Others prefer objects to chew, areas to dig, self feeding toys, or even a video to keep themselves occupied and "busy" while you are unavailable.

What type of play should be avoided?

Try to avoid games that pit your strength against your puppies. Tug-of-war games seem to be an enjoyable diversion for many puppies and they do help to direct chewing and biting toward an acceptable play object, rather than an owner's hands or clothing. On the other hand, some puppies get very excited, overly stimulated and become far too aggressive during tug-of-war games. A general rule of thumb for tug-of-war (or any other game for that matter) is to avoid it, unless you are the one to initiate the game, and can stop it as soon as the need arises. Teaching the dog to "drop" on command can help to ensure that you remain in control of object play sessions such as fetch and tug-of-war.

Although games like chase are good exercise, they can often result in wild exuberant play that gets out of control. Again, a good rule of thumb is to only play these games, if you are the one to initiate the game, and are capable of stopping the game immediately should it get out of control. Many dogs can be taught to play "hide and seek" without becoming too excited. Other dogs like to "search" for their toys and bring them to you.

How can I teach my puppy to play fetch?

Most young puppies, even those that do not have an inherent instinct to retrieve, can be taught how to play fetch from an early age. You will need to train your puppy to do three things; go get the toy, bring it back, and relinquish it to you so that you can throw it again. First, make the toy enticing. Try a squeaky toy or a ball. Toss the toy a short distance, 1-2 feet, and encourage your puppy to go to it. When she gets there, praise her. If she picks it up in her mouth, tell her "good dog". Then, move backwards a short way, clap your hands and entice your puppy to come towards you. All the while you should be encouraging verbally with a happy tone of voice and lots of praise. When your puppy returns to you, say "give it or "release" and show another toy or even a small food treat. Most puppies will gladly give the toy to get the new toy or treat and at the same time will quickly learn the "give" or "release" command. Then, by repeating the entire sequence of events again, the game of fetch itself, should soon be enough of a reward that food and toys will no longer be necessary to entice the puppy to give the toy. At the end of each fetch play session, have the puppy return the toy and give a toy or chew treat for the puppy to play with as a final reward for releasing the toy.