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# PLAYING WITH YOUR DOG

## BENEFITS AND GAME SUGGESTION

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**Module:** Introduction to Canine Psychology - Unit 1, Question 3

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**Assignment description**

'This unit teaches you the importance of play. Write an essay in which you identify the benefits for the dog in playing games, and devise a game, which will be enjoyed by dog and owner, indicating the skills it encourages the dog to use.'

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## The benefits of playing

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Besides being intrinsically fun, regularly playing with your dog is beneficial, if not essential. The section below breaks down the various benefits of playing in detail.

### Physical exercise

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#### Mental and physical fitness

Physical exercise carries similar benefits to dogs as it does us: weight management and psychological well-being (exercise promotes the release of relaxing serotonin and energising endorphins for humans as well as for dogs).

#### Efficiency

Games can be a very efficient way for your dog to burn energy without having to go outside, needing a lot of space, or exerting yourself. I am not suggesting that playing should replace walks, but rather that it can be a very efficient way of burning off additional energy at relatively little time and energy expense on your part.

### Mental stimulation

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#### Depleting need for mental challenge

Playing can be a powerful tool to keep your dog mentally stimulation. This is particularly important for certain breeds with intense needs for mental exercise, like border collies. When not provided with sufficient mental challenges, some dogs can develop behaviour problems such as apathy, depression, aggression, hyperactivity, or destructiveness.

#### Improving mental skills

Mental stimulation games can help your dog improve various mental skills, such as focus, creative problem-solving, or memory. I find that regular mental stimulation makes for keener, more alert dogs. I also suspect that it helps keep old age at bay significantly longer (as is also hypothesized by Bruce Fogle - Ref 5: Fogle, Bruce – 1990).

## **Opportunity for dog-dog playing**

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### **Practice dog-dog communication skills**

Playing is also a safe way for the dog to practice his communication skills (Ref 5: Fogle, Bruce – 1990) such as calming signals, play bows, or time-out requests. These are invaluable communication tools for your dog to diffuse tension in the face of a potential dog-dog fight.

### **Desensitisation to boisterous situations and proximity**

I try to get my dog to play with other dogs at least a couple of times a week, as this prevents his dog-oriented social skills from getting rusty. When given the opportunity to play with other dogs, he will give them a cursory romp at best, and then immediately comes back to me, but at least he got some brief practice at play-fighting, chasing, and dog-dog proximity, thus making him less decreasingly wary of other dogs. Where he used to run away in distress at the approach of a play-chasing dog, he now calmly waits behind me until the commotion is over. Regularly allowing him to join other dogs in play has gradually improved his ability to discriminate between rough play and real threat, thus making him more comfortable, and more controllable.

## **Satisfying drives**

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### **Dogs are intrinsically playful**

There is much anecdotal evidence attesting to the fact that dogs are a particularly playful species. It has been theorized (by Ref 5: Fogle, Bruce – 1990, among others) that this is related to the fact that they are neotenised (subject to selective pressure for youthful traits). Regardless of the underlying reasons, there is no arguing the fact that most dogs get a lot of pleasure out of the activity of playing.

### **Drives are reservoirs to be depleted**

To illustrate a dog's drives, Konrad Lorenz made a very useful analogy with hydraulics. He represented each drive as a reservoir needing to be regularly depleted. According to Lorenz, failure to regularly deplete individual reservoirs

brings about the risk of frustration-related behaviour problems (Ref 7: Lorenz, Konrad – 1949). Individual breeds of dog, and individual dogs themselves, have specific drive depletion needs: some are retrieving addicts while others need to run mile-long distances to be anywhere near satisfied. Cleverly selected play can be a very efficient tool to deplete specific drives following the dog's needs.

### **Controlling intense drives**

Traditional trainers would advise one to avoid playing games like tug-of-war, or rough housing, for fear that it will actually rouse a dog's dormant drive (Ref 8: Sykes, Barbara – 2001). My personal position goes even further than Konrad Lorenz on this point: I not only believe it is our fundamental duty to allow an outlet for these drives, but I also see play as a great opportunity to bring the start, end and intensity of these behaviours under control.

### **Practicing obedience skills**

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#### **Practicing known cues**

Play enables you to hone your dog's obedience skills in a relaxed atmosphere. The games I play with my dog, for example, often involve 'wait', 'let go', 'come here', etc. I particularly practice traffic-related commands, such as 'cross' before crossing the road, or 'pavement' to come back on the pavement after being briefly allowed to play on the (quiet) street. In a traffic situation, some of these commands could save his life, so I feel they can never be practised enough.

#### **Play is the ideal motivational state for learning**

It has been demonstrated beyond a doubt that new skills are more quickly and more thoroughly assimilated when the subject is relaxed and positively motivated (e.g. having fun) at the time of training (Ref 6: Lindsay, Steven R. – 2000). To teach my dog a new skill, I frequently approach the task with a game of shaping using a clicker, making sure the atmosphere stays playful and stopping when his interest wanes. Watching the excited and fun-filled attitude of a dog in the middle of a shaping game being leaves me in no doubt that they find the experience very pleasurable indeed.

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## Correcting unwanted behaviour

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Playing can give you the opportunity to correct unwanted behaviours (Ref 1: Bielakiewicz, Gerilyn J. – 2005), like jumping to grab an object in your hands or hoarding your belongings. Playing can be used in a variety of ways to control these behaviours: you could, for example:

- **Add elements to the games that are incompatible with the unwanted behaviour.** In the case of wild grabbing, for example, I only start a tug-of-war game after a sit-stay and a signal. Along the same lines, one could aim to teach the dog to love retrieving, instead of just hoarding.
- **Teach 'object distinction' games.** Through these, the dog learns to pick a ball or chew toy, and not a sock or a child's toy. Gradually, the concept that not all palatable objects are for mouthing will sink in.
- **Desensitisation tool:** You could systematically associate the presence of a previously unpleasant stimulus, like the delivery man for certain dogs, with a retrieving game. Throwing the ball while signing the post takes some practice, but at least the dog gradually loses its negative associations with the postman.

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## Self-control

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### Time-out and bite intensity control

Games can teach your dog to control its bite intensity (Ref 4: Eilert-Overbeck, Brigitte – 2007). To teach your dog to control the force of its bite, you could interrupt the game with a yelp every time he bites too roughly for your liking. You could also teach the dog a 'time-out' command so that he calms down when things get heated, only allowing him to resume the game once he has cooled down a little.

### Teaching limits of rough-housing

Some traditional authors, like Barbara Sykes (Ref 8: Sykes, Barbara – 2001), sternly discourage any kind of rough-housing with your dog for fear it will shake up your role as a leader. My position is that playing rough house games, and the limits thereof, is purely a matter of personal preference, and is rather loosely related, if at all, to a dominance relationship. If you do not want your dog to mouth your hand,

then the dog is not allowed to mouth your hands and you must teach it that. But if you, like me, enjoy the odd bout of play-fighting, I see no trouble as long as the dog starts and stops on command and does not get too het up. I draw the line with play-fighting between a dog and a child, though, which I would always discourage.

### **Teaching the concept of delayed gratification (i.e. operant conditioning)**

Another way in which playing can teach your dog self-control is that it can hone the concept of delayed gratification, and can be used to reward polite behaviour. To illustrate: you can easily delay the start of the game until the dog has stopped pestering you into playing through negative attention-seeking like wild jumping, pawing or barking. This teaches the dog some impulse-control, and reinforces its understanding of the following principle: 'If I ask for this by sit/staying rather than grabbing it, I get it quicker'. My dog has integrated that principle to other high-motivation situations, spontaneously and amazingly quickly: he now offers a sit before the door when I grab his leash or before his bowl before I serve him food.

### **Fine-tuning motor skills and senses**

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Some games can improve motor skills and senses such as balance, coordination, reflexes, dexterity, direction or smell. Such skills are, admittedly, not of essential importance for the dog's survival as a modern pet, but they can really show-case how amazing dogs are as a species. I never cease to be impressed by my dog's ability to zone in on a treat hidden in miles of overgrown grass, or even on top of a tall object. More impressive still is the blind Jack Russell I came across: he would retrieve a tennis ball for hours on end, running at warp speed and often catching the ball mid-air, through sound and smell alone. These remarkable displays of agility never fail to reinforce my respect for a dog's abilities as a species, and are greatly improved by play.

### **Emboldens the shy dog**

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#### **Exploration games to encourage mild risk-taking in novel environment**

Our dog was an anxious mess when we first had him, having spent two years in the shelter system and some time before that as a stray dog. He was extremely

inhibited and would offer no behaviours at all, sticking to his general strategy of 'keeping a low profile to stay out of trouble'. It made for a very well-behaved but hard to train and miserable dog. Gentle, but guided play, gradually brought out the inventive, facetious dog that we now have. I consciously keep playing exploration games that gently push his limits and broaden his world, improving his boldness in the face of the unfamiliar.

### **Role swap: blessed are the meek**

Play can also be beneficial to the shy dog in that fixed relationship roles can temporarily take a backseat during play-fighting, so that that a shy dog gets to play boss once in a while, and vice and versa (Ref 5: Fogle, Bruce – 1990). This gets the normally shy dog to experience bolder behaviours patterns.

## **Fun**

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### **A happy dog is rewarding**

Put simply, the main point of play is fun. Playing ensures that you and your dog share good moments, and the more good moments you share, the closer your bond will grow. As any dog lover will testify, watching your dog in a state of pure bliss is extremely rewarding.

### **Averts boredom and keeps owner motivated**

Playing can also bring in welcome variety in an otherwise routine walk, and extend the duration of a short walk around the block.

### **A fun dog is less scary**

Teaching your dog a crowd-pleasing trick can be a fun way of diffusing tension, as it often charms people who are normally wary of dogs (Ref 1: Bielakiewicz, Gerilyn J. – 2005). One of our regular house-tricks is to get the dog to find the house keys hidden somewhere in the living room. His obvious excitement when he has found them in a particularly tricky spot is often enough to thaw the initial reservations that guests might have had about the dog.

## Game suggestion: tree-treats and car keys!

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### Description of the game

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While out on a walk, I am particularly fond of playing this combination game with my dog:

#### 1. Hide the 'tree-treat' and find the grass treat

- a. I ask for his attention by calling his name (not much of a challenge considering I am handling treats...).
- b. I lodge a treat in the bark of a tree, or on a bench, or whatever suitable object I come across.
- c. I ask him to follow me and we trot away from the tree, treat untouched. I give him a treat if he follows me without hesitation. He sometimes tries to get the 'tree-treat' before following me, in which event I gently say 'no'. If he comes back to me on that soft admonition alone, he gets a treat to reward his impulse control. If he does not, that ends the game for a few seconds while I casually ignore him and we get on with our walk.
- d. Once we are at some distance from the hidden treat, I ask him to stay put (I vary the cue I practice, switching between 'sit/stay', 'down/stay' or 'wait').
- e. I throw a treat in the vegetation and ask him to find it ('Where is it?' is the cue). An interesting twist is that when he does not find it after a while (very rarely), and I cannot remember where it is (all the time), I discretely throw another treat. If he catches me doing that, he shall keep looking for the first treat after he has eaten the second.

#### 2. Bolting back to the tree-treat then back to me

- a. As soon as he has found the 'grass treat', I praise him and send him bolting back to the tree/bench/whatever (with a 'straight' cue). He has to remember which supporting object to head for (which he invariably does) and where on the object the treat is (which he often gets wrong). To vary pleasures, I sometimes place the treat in a precarious position so that he must be very gentle to avoid pushing the treat out of reach. In no time, he has become brain-surgeon accurate in this operation.

- b. While he is distracted by his search for the 'tree-treat', I delicately drop my car keys somewhere memorable. It needs to be memorable as I have nearly lost them many, many, many times playing that game. I also mention 'delicately' because if he hears the keys jiggle, he will cheat and note where I hide them for later retrieval.
- c. Once he has found the 'tree-treat', I praise him and call him back to me. When he comes back to me, I nearly always give him a treat or two to reinforce the recall, often using an extra palatable treat like cheese or sausage to strengthen it further.

### 3. Finding the keys

- a. Once he comes back to me, I ask him to look for my keys ('keys' is the cue). While waiting for him to find them, I make a conscious effort to take casual deep breaths, look vaguely away, and project a generally relaxed body language. I take these precautions as he is still a very inhibited dog at times and, if I am too focused on his 'mission', he can freeze for fear of getting it wrong.
- b. When he paws the keys, he gets a jackpot amount of treats and a lot of praise. I then pocket the keys, and start the cycle again, finding the next appropriate supporting object.



(Picture above) Treat is stuck in bark of tree and I've sent him 'straight' to look for it.



(Picture above) Treat was delicately balanced on the statue and I've sent him 'straight' to look for it.



(Picture above) Treat was stuck in the bark (a favourite strategy) and I've sent him 'straight' to look for it.



(Picture above) Treat was delicately balanced on one of the spikes and he inadvertently dislodged it in uncharacteristic clumsiness.



(Pictures above) He now has to work out how to get to the treat. After a short while, I gave him a little clue, and he ran around the fence to get it.



(Picture above) I balanced a treat on a pole. Another common support object.

### Benefits of this game

The benefits of this game are plenty:

- He gets **physical exercise** running back and forth between the tree/bench/object and myself.
- **Obedience practice:** sit/stay, wait, down/stay, and recall;
- **He finds my keys:** I am hoping that, one day, that will come in handy in a live situation!
- Practice of **self-control** and reinforcement of **delayed gratification** (he is rewarded for following me instead of trying to get the 'tree-treat' immediately)
- **Practice attention:** calling his name so he pays attention to where I plant the 'tree-treat'.
- It's a lot of **fun** watching him run back to the tree like a maniac, or frantically searching for the 'tree-treat', or excitedly and proudly pawing the keys.

- He is a very subdued dog and this game challenges him to spontaneously offer **creative problem-solving** behaviours (like the fence episode).
- His **dexterity** and **sense of smell** get honed to an amazing degree of subtlety.
- It exercises his **attention span** and **memory**: he has to keep focusing on where the hidden 'tree-treat' is after being distracted by my request to follow me.
- You **can play it everywhere**, even at home, sending him between the couch, living room table, etc.

Note: As most of my games involve food, I divide his ration every morning, and take from that allowance for our games and for reinforcing good behaviours throughout the day. As a result, he gets relatively little in his bowl at actual meal times, and gets trickle-fed all day with our games and training instead.

## Conclusion

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The importance and advantages of playing are many-fold, and it is an absolutely essential element of dog ownership. It is not only fun, and a fabulous training tool, but it is absolutely essential for the mental and physical well-being of most dogs.

This essay covered the many benefits of playing in detail, and described in detail a multi-purpose game that I designed for my dog. I would encourage every dog owner to invent tailor-made games for their dogs, to target the depletion of the animal's specific drives and have a happy, satisfied canine in the house.

## References

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**Ref 1: Bielakiewicz, Gerilyn J. – 2005**

‘Only dog tricks your dog will ever need, the’ – Adams Media.

**Ref 2: Donaldson, Jean – 2005**

‘Culture Clash (the)’ – James and Kenneth Publications.

**Ref 3: Donaldson, Jean – 2008**

‘Oh Behave!’ – Dogwise Publishing.

**Ref 4: Eilert-Overbeck, Brigitte – 2007**

<sup>1</sup>‘Leukste spelletjes voor uw hond, de’ – Shutterstock.

**Ref 5: Fogle, Bruce – 1990**

‘Dog’s mind, the’ – Pelham Books.

**Ref 6: Lindsay, Steven R. – 2000**

‘Applied Dog Behavior and Training – Adaptation and Learning’ – vol. I – Blackwell Publishing.

**Ref 7: Lorenz, Konrad – 1949**

‘Man meets dog’ – Routledge.

**Ref 8: Sykes, Barbara – 2001**

‘Understanding and handling dog aggression’ – Crowood Press.

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<sup>1</sup> I could not find the English translation of this book. Literally translated, the title means: ‘The nicest games for your dog’