

## Mental Madness!

Do you live with this dog?

When you come home tired from work are you greeted by your dog jumping hysterically around you, happily displaying her latest excavation from under the sofa cushions, in the shoe closet or (yuck!) the bottom of the kitchen garbage can? How can this be - she had a big walk only that morning?!



Are your neighbors greeted by your barking dog at the front window when they pass by your house each day? That seems odd, she never barks when you're at home . . .

Does your dog walk about the house with a ball in her mouth working her jaw like it was an Olympic event? And you thought she just loved her ball . . .

How do you cope - did you just have the misfortune of choosing the "bad" dog from the bunch?

Many families are at a loss trying to deal with these behaviours. Some mistakenly respond to the dog's acts by choosing confinement or isolation in the back yard during the day. Others are incorrectly directed to physically or verbally punish their dogs or even take away their toys. Some dog owners take the motto "a tired dog is a good dog" to heart. They put their dogs on exercise routines that would make more than a few competitive athletes ashamed. Given the growing popularity of sporting and working breeds as companions, it's hard for the average family to physically tire out their dog. In fact, too much physical stimulation can backfire and cause some of the very behaviours they're trying to eliminate.

Unfortunately, many pet dog homes are missing the mark. Their dogs are bored – plain and simple. Most of us have a day full of mental challenges and problem solving, but our dogs do not always get the same opportunity. Mental stimulation is just as important as physical exercise in the daily lives of our dogs.

So how can we help our dogs to burn off some mental energy and enjoy themselves in the way they were meant to, safely and appropriately?

"Stress caused by our lifestyles may not be a factor we can change, but through developing our dog's cognitive capacity...we can promote a dog more able to adapt to urban life." says Kay Laurence, a well-known clicker trainer and Lead Judge of the popular UK television series "The Underdog Show".

One of the simplest (and cheapest) is to make your dog's mealtimes more challenging. Left to their own devices, dogs would spend a good amount of time and effort hunting around for food. By providing it ready to go in a silver bowl, we take away a huge opportunity for a mental energy burn. Next mealtime, take your dog's bowl into the yard (safely fenced, of course!), toss her kibble all around the yard and let your dog sniff out her dinner. In addition to getting fed, she'll expend even more energy going back over the area, making sure she didn't miss anything. You can do the same exercise in the house, just be careful where you toss the food!

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The food itself can become more entertaining by the addition of raw entertainment bones to your dog's diet.

Another meal delivery option is to make use of a treat-dispensing toy like a Kong®. Stuff it full of your dog's dinner and leave it to her to puzzle out how to get the food from the toy into her tummy. Once she gets the hang of it, you can increase the challenge by adding water or broth to the kibble in the Kong® and freezing it or offering the stuffed Kong® in an empty yogurt container with the lid on. For more advanced dogs, you can find a variety of treats that are almost as large as the Kong® itself – harder to get in and definitely harder to get out!

Many dog toy manufacturers have caught onto the benefit of more challenging mealtimes, and there is a veritable smorgasbord of these toys available. For an investment of around \$20, some popular examples include:

- Kong® (the original food dispensing dog toy)  
[www.kongcompany.com](http://www.kongcompany.com)
- Canine Genius (one of our favorites!)  
[www.caninegenius.com](http://www.caninegenius.com)
- Tricky Treat Ball, [www.omegapaw.com/trickytreatball.html](http://www.omegapaw.com/trickytreatball.html)
- Treat Stik, [www.treatstik.com](http://www.treatstik.com)
- Dog Pyramid, Buster Food Cube, Tug a Jug – all available at [www.clickertraining.com/store](http://www.clickertraining.com/store) (click on Puzzle Toys and Boredom Busters)



Up the investment and there is another level of more complex, interactive toys designed to entertain and challenge your dog's mental abilities:

- Fetch and Reward™ Treat Pouch – a treat-filled Velcro treat pouch ([www.katiesbumpers.com](http://www.katiesbumpers.com))
- Dog Tornado, Dog Twister, Dog Turbo and Dog Casino – puzzles for your dog to solve ([www.pawlickers.com/products/manufacturers/nina-ottosson](http://www.pawlickers.com/products/manufacturers/nina-ottosson))
- Kongtime - So cool - spits out stuffed Kongs!® ([www.kongcompany.com](http://www.kongcompany.com))

(Always check the package information before leaving your dog alone with any toy.)



Add in an investment of your time, and try a more mentally challenging training style you and your dog can learn together. Both Targeting and Shaping require your dog to make some choices on her own in order to earn a reward. They're fun to do and a great way to allow your dog's unique personality to shine through as you watch her puzzle out the answer. Consider teaching your dog some entertaining tricks (play dead, get a beer from the fridge, tidy up your toys) or games (hide and seek, the shell game). Some resources include:

- The Magic of Shaping – Explore the Possibilities DVD by Pamela Dennison
- Right on Target! – Taking Dog Training to a New Level by Mandy Book and Cheryl Smith
- 101 Dog Tricks – Step-By-Step Activities to Engage, Challenge, and Bond With Your Dog by Kyra Sundance
- Learning Games by Kay Laurence

(All of the above resources and more are available at [www.dogwise.com](http://www.dogwise.com))

Many positive trainers offer classes for Shaping, Targeting, Tricks and Games. Look for a trainer in your area by checking the Trainer Search on the Association of Pet Dog Trainers website ([www.apdt.com](http://www.apdt.com)).