

# Boredom Busters

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The 21<sup>st</sup> century is hard on dogs. They have swapped their 'day' jobs of herding, retrieving game, killing vermin and chasing rabbits for the simple pleasure of being our companions. Sounds like a cushy deal - free food and board for just hanging around with your favourite person, but in many cases they've been duped! Most of us are unable to spend as much time as we would like with our dogs – leaving them not only bored and jobless but alone as well.

If your dog is confined in a yard for most of the day, he faces many of the same problems exhibited by exotic zoo animals. A lack of stimulation and opportunity to interact naturally with the environment causes the animal to display stress related behaviours – in the dog these could be excessive barking, destructive chewing and digging and self-mutilation. Zookeepers have put a lot of time and thought into 'environmental enrichment' programs and dog owners can now benefit from their expertise.

## Planning a dog friendly area

A good environment starts with an area that is clean and safe with the basic needs of adequate shelter and free access to water being met. From this one can add elements which will allow your dog to expend some of his natural instincts in positive, non-destructive way. Some things you might like to consider are:

1. Providing access to a **'view of the world'**. Many dogs will be entertained for hours if they are able to see passers by and observe other daily events. Allowing access to a fenced front yard, a see-through side gate or even a front window in the home can be a practical and easy way to keep your dog amused.
2. **A doggy door** is an excellent way to provide your dog with choices about his daily routine – a factor which has been proven to reduce stress in dogs. Many dogs prefer to sleep inside the house (den) and have only short outings throughout the day to 'monitor' the backyard. Allowing access into the home even when you are away is also often effective in reducing nuisance barking and improving separation anxiety.
3. Try to provide **a variety of mini-environments** in your back garden making it more interesting for your dog to explore. Simple suggestions include a grassed lawn area (for rolling, eating, bones, stretching out and running around with toys) a shrubby area under trees (for sniffing and exploring) a rock garden (great for attracting entertaining little lizards to chase), a pond (without delicate plants or fish!) a cool spot under the house (for deep sleep and privacy) or the perennial favorite - a shady verandah (close to house, elevated, protected position).
4. **A sand pit** or designated digging area is an excellent way to satisfy your dog's natural desire to explore his environment with his paws and claws. Either allocate an area of your back garden which may be used for this purpose or buy a child's clam shell and fill with sand. Lace this area daily with food treats such as raw hides, just beneath the surface. As your dog becomes more proficient you can bury the treats deeper. Periodically rake the sand again – dogs are attracted to areas that have been recently disturbed which is the reason they so often love to dig-up the plants you've just planted!
5. The other half of the clam shell can be used for **a wading pool**. This is a particularly good idea on hot days. Even dogs that may not like to swim often enjoy cooling their feet or tummy in a shallow pool. Your dog may well invent other games to play with his pool. One dog, whose owner had put a rubber hose handle onto the wading pool soon learned that pulling the pool around the garden was almost as much fun as getting wet! Another kelpie with a pool enjoyed dipping empty flower pots into the



pool and holding them up until the water emptied out – this was repeated until bored.

6. A novel idea is to fill the clam shell with the balls they put in 'kid's ballrooms'. Toss in several yummy treats and then add one small dog such as a Jack Russell and watch the fun begin! Some dogs soon become '**ball pit addicts**' – a great way to burn off energy before heading off to work.
7. **A bird feeder** can serve a dual purpose – benefiting not only the birds but entertaining your dog who will be watching out for the avian visitors and cleaning up any scraps they might drop below. Just two precautions with this one, make certain the feeder is high enough so your dog can't reach the birds themselves and if your dog is the type who would rather bark at the birds then watch in silence – skip ahead to the next suggestion.
8. Dogs enjoy both elevated positions with a better view to the world, and snug, den-like places under things – depending on whether they are investigating or resting. **A simple sturdy table** can easily provide both these environments for your dog. The table should be large and sturdy enough for the dog to be able to jump up and lie down comfortably. This is his 'view of the world area'. Beneath the table place a comfy dog bed such as one of the many trampoline varieties. Now depending on your dog's inclination he can chose whether he feels like being 'on watch patrol' or safely curled up asleep in his 'den'.
9. **Tyres** and inner tubes can be put to a myriad of uses and are especially good for 'destructo dogs'.
  - To hang from a tree, put a length of PVC piping on the rope to prevent the dog getting tangled in the rope. Secure the pipe in place by knotting the rope.
  - As above but attach a short rope to the bottom of a bike tyre and teach the dog to tug on it to get the tyre swinging.
  - A car tyre on the ground is a great place to hide treats, and tough dogs can push and shove into them without doing any harm to themselves or the tyre.

Car inner tubes can also be used as tug toys and are often available free of charge. Fold in half, cut one end, bind half the inner tube together with string, leaving the half on the cut end loose so the dog can grip. Attach a rope through the other end and then attach to a high tree branch or similar so that the tube swings. Again, it is a good idea to cover the attaching rope with a PVC pipe.

10. For the dog who seriously loves to tug Aussie Dog Products\* offer the ultimate home alone toy – available in four different sizes. The 'HomeAlone' is **a combination treat ball, bungee ball and tug toy** which can be hung from a tree or other high place. Let your dog see you place a small amount of food in the ball. In the dog's attempt to reach the food by pulling the grip, food will fall around the dog and it will release it's grip to get the food. The toy then springs back above it's head. Many dogs will tug even without the reward of food falling from the ball. This is a heavy duty toy for the very active, dog of any size.
11. **Heavy Duty Balls** such as the indestructible bully ball made of hard plastic can also keep some dogs amused off and on for hours. These balls are designed to be pushed around by the dogs chest and shoulders rather than be carried in the mouth. The balls are easy to push and roll and eat up loads of energy! In fact some dogs may need to have their time limited with these balls to prevent strain and heat exhaustion. Not quite as tough but still loads of fun for smaller dogs are the 'exercise balls' used in gyms. The principle is the same – the dog loves to push the ball around and mount mock 'attacks'.

**Balls that dogs can throw** themselves – such as soccer balls that are surrounded by a cotton rope 'net' making it easy for the dog to grab and toss the ball. Similarly some large hard plastic balls on the market include a handle for the dog to grab and toss himself.



All of the above can be left in your dog's everyday living area to enhance his environment and to provide him with opportunities for play. However we all enjoy change and new challenges. While rotating toys is a good idea there is a still better way to keep your dog busy for hours. Zookeepers around the world have been doing it for years and now dog owners are beginning to recognize the benefits too – what is it? Simply giving your dog the opportunity to work for his food just as he would have done in nature.

## **Making the most of your dog's daily food intake.**

Perhaps you have seen the chimpanzees at the zoo hunting for termites, or poking for honey using long thin sticks. Devising clever ways to make exotic animals 'work for their supper' has become one of the major developments in animal care. Giving these animals a 'job to do' has made a major difference in the quality of their lives, reducing boredom and stress. Your dog is no different.

Rather than providing your dog with a free meal served up in a bowl at the end of the day (total enjoyment for most dogs equals just a few seconds!) – it is a far better idea to allocate all or some of the meal to home alone activities. Although you may add some special treats to the mix, using meal rations prevents problems of obesity and/or unbalanced nutrition. Now, instead of waiting for a few seconds of joy at the end of each day, your dog will be able to enjoy the very natural sequence of search, chase, bite, hold and dissect in exchange for a 'reward meal'. This process will take far longer and expend more energy than the time it takes to gulp down a meal in a bowl. And the good news is that while your dog is dissecting your hidden treat/rewards he's not destroying other things in your garden like the washing, prized pot plants or hoses.

Dogs have finely tuned senses and brains wired to utilize the information they provide. A dog's nose is a work of art – able to track minute traces of scent great distances. You don't have to teach your dog how to scent – he already knows – just give him the opportunity and he'll soon become a treat tracking fanatic. It is no wonder then that the vast majority of 'home alone' toys are based on the premise of making your dog work to receive a self-released food reward.

## **Some of the best Food Based Boredom Busters are:**

1. Kongs\* and similar hollow rubber toys or smoked marrow bones. There are endless ways to stuff a Kong\* with recipes ranging from beginners level – loosely stuffed with large treats to university level – for experienced treat dissectors with lots of yummy things jammed into every crevice. Common foods to use as stuffing include dry dog food, cheese, canned dog or cat food, peanut butter, a little vegemite or liverwurst (to seal the ends) leftovers, dried liver and commercial dog treats. In most cases it is important to vary the contents to keep your dog really interested. You may choose to simply hand your dog his stuffed treat as you walk out the door however a better option once your dog understands the game – is to hide the stuffed object somewhere in the garden. You may even hide two or three! The ultimate luxury from the USA is a Kong Dispenser which will dispense up to five stuffed kongs throughout the course of the day!
2. Buster cubes and similar devices are cubes and balls made of plastic or rubber which are filled with dry doggy treats. The ball or cube has an opening which can be adjusted to make it easier or harder for treats to come out. Your dog will learn to push the toy around using his feet or nose to slowly dispense the treats inside.
3. A cheap and simple alternative is to half fill a plastic PET bottle with kibble, pasta or water and allow your dog to toss it around. If you leave the top off treats will slowly spill out. Alternately put a PET bottle sealed into the freezer for a short time. When removed, the change in air temperature will make it expand. A lot of dogs will like the noise it makes and enjoy trying to 'catch' it in their mouths. (Note: some dogs may need supervision with a PET bottle if they are likely to swallow the plastic.)



4. Throw tiny pieces of dry dog food or cat kibble around the backyard while your chow hound spends hours making sure he hasn't missed one! Very hard to spot on pebble crete or scattered in garden beds. Be wary of throwing on recently mown lawns however as over a period of time toxins can build in the mulch and might have an averse affect on your dog's tummy.
5. Tear a rags into long strips. Roll into each strip a little treat and tie into knots. Make the bundle astight as possible and then give it to your dog to explore and dissect. Most dogs become really absorbed trying to reach the hidden delectable treats. In some cases the center treasure could be a tennis ball or other popular toy.

Iced treats – kongs ,other stuffed toys, or simple ice cream containers can be filled with diluted stock or other liquid sensations and frozen. Add a really special treat into the center and watch your dog lick away trying to reach the frozen center. Perfect for a hot day's entertainment.

By using food in this way you are not only meeting your dogs daily nutritional requirements, but are also providing him with mental stimulation and perhaps most importantly providing an outlet for natural dog behaviours such as chewing, digging, exploring and dissecting.

## **The most important boredom buster – You!**

While it is great to find ways to help your dog amuse himself in your absence there is no substitute for time spent with you. The most environmentally enriched back yard is still a poor second to a long walk or a free run. Many dogs could probably relate to the little boy who gets a terrific kite for Christmas only to discover it isn't much fun unless someone takes you to the park so you can fly it together. Make the most of our boredom busters, but never forget your dog's best friend will always be you.

*\*Visit Aussie Dog at: [www.aussiedog.com.au](http://www.aussiedog.com.au)*

*\*Kongs are a rubber hollow toy, visit their website full of 'kong recipies' at [www.kongcompany.com](http://www.kongcompany.com)*

