

Hi Everyone,

Thanks for downloading my article about Brain Drain activities. When I first mentioned it in my column and told people to write in for a copy I thought I was going to use something I wrote a while ago but once I re-read I realized it needed updating so I got to work. What follows is the update. That's the good news. The bad news is I haven't done much checking for spelling and grammar other than what the word processor does so let me know if you see anything that needs attention.

Regards

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Wade". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "J" and "W".

John "Ask the Dog Guy" Wade

Ask the Dog Guy - About Brain Drain

Nature's Template

Outside of the human world and only in a very small part of it does the concept of “We don’t work, we don’t eat.”, not exist. Our minds have to stay active and agile in order to keep putting bread on the table.



Captive Animals Need Stimulation or Behavior Problems Arise

Other than many zoo and farm animals, pet dogs are the only animal on the planet that don’t have to work to get their dinner and I think that costs them. A little challenge goes a long way to spicing up the day and it seems to bring about a state of calmness when other needs like exercise are also addressed. It makes training easier as well!

That is why so many zoos incorporate some level of difficulty attaining food for their more intelligent animals, and they incorporate intellectually stimulating toys into their environments as well. Otherwise, the incidents of behavioral problems, i.e. obsessive compulsive swaying (elephants), pacing (polar bears), wall licking (giraffes) etc. are common.

By putting food in our dog’s bowl day in day out we’re circumventing that part of nature’s template ([See my book “The Beautiful Balance – Dog Training with Nature’s Template” for how we can tap into nature’s template while training](#)) and there is always a consequence when we do so. Just as with people, if the mind isn’t turned outward and kept busy it turns inward and gets busy. That consequence may simply be a dog that is unruly and scattered in its focus or in more serious cases is fraught with anxiety in a variety of forms.

Interactive Toys vs Brain Drain Toys Distinction

I want to make a distinction between the sort of toys we're talking about in this article and the sort that you use to play with your dog, like a ball or a Kong that you might throw. Interactive toys can be used to stimulate a dog's brain as well.

I've added a short segment at the end about interactive toys. Our main focus here though is brain drain toys and activities for that matter that are intended to self-amuse/challenge the dog. Some activities like Nosey Dogs, which is mentioned later as well, require some interactivity to get the dog going to the point where it requires little intervention to achieve the calming affects.

Puppies are Puppies



Exercise is important for puppies as well but their bones are going to be green for quite some time so type and duration are different than an adult dog. Avoid long walks and use brain drain activities to wear them out.

Treat vs. Dinner


You may have been using treat dispensing toys with your dog successfully. You may have tried and found your dog uninterested or barely interested. I'm going to suggest that you move away from the concept of giving your dog treats – to giving your dog a chance to earn its dinner (pay check). I know of trainers that never feed their own dogs. Every piece of kibble is earned and I have a client that after learning how to use Nosey Dogs exercises to stimulate her dog's mind she got him using his nose for his dinner servings by throwing his kibble out into the back yard and let him sniff each piece down. That's probably the simplest brain drain activity of all and just as effective. I wouldn't start off by launching a bowl of kibble far and wide I'd just dump it at my dog's feet the first few times and then broaden the arc as he got the idea.

There are a lot of manufactured puzzle game toys that dispense treats and challenge a dog's mind. For a highly treat motivated dog they can be useful but some dogs are not as inclined – **Unless they are hungry** and if the food bowl disappears and some form of reasonable puzzle takes it place they'll sooner or later put their mind to the task and you'll both reap the benefits. Healthy dogs won't starve themselves. Once they're hungry they'll go to work. Most of our pet dogs haven't been hungry a day in their lives so it's hard to imagine just how smart they can be if sufficiently motivated.

For some people, putting their dog in a hungry state will bother them far more than it bothers the dog. I have seen healthy dogs not eat for 3 to 4 days when their diet had to be changed and that's when the food was

being upgraded. As I say, that would bother a lot of people but check with your veterinarian and you will learn if the dog is healthy and drinking water daily it's nothing to worry about. The fact is your dog might have to get hungry before the brain drain strategies can be implemented. You'll just have to weight the pros and cons but if you're willing to give it a shot here's how to ease into it if you're worried about going cold turkey.

Exercise



Brain Drain activities don't replace an adult dog's exercise. Unless your dog is a toy breed a walk isn't sufficient to provide the calming effects associated with cardiovascular stimulation. That's where training comes in. If your dog thinks "Come!" means, "If you have a minute check your daytimer." read my book – ["The Beautiful Balance – Dog Training with Nature's Template."](#)

First 72 hours

First, if it is an elderly dog or there is any reason you feel your dog a medical issue or issues go visit your veterinarian and tell him or her what you're doing. If there is nothing physically bothering the dog and the dog is drinking as per its norm it will be fine going cold turkey but here is how to wean away from the food dish and onto the more challenging ways of getting meals.

Remember you will be giving your dog the same number of opportunities to eat every day. He or she may just hold out for the easy way out so try this: ☺

1. Stop giving all treats. No cookies, rawhide, table scraps etc. and make sure everyone in the household is aware of the new rules. You can go back to giving treats later.

2. If you normally free feed (the food is always out) cut back to once or twice a day (once is

better.) Remove food after 5 minutes. If you cut back to twice, after 3 days maximum go to #2.

3. If you normally feed your dog twice daily then on the first day replace one meal offering one of the new ways below. If it's a puppy that is feeding 4 or more times do so one meal at a time. (Puppies figure this stuff out much faster than older dogs so don't worry.)

4. Don't be surprised if your dogs show little or no interest in the new way of eating. At least they'll be proving that skipping a meal isn't that big deal to you.

5. Withdraw one normally presented meal every day until your dog's only choice is to "hunt" down the food in the new container.
6. Fill the new container right in front of your dog at the time of day you would normally fill the food bowl and leave a few kibble on the floor, let your dog eat them and then knock about the new way" container until something spills out. Even if the dog doesn't take you up on the hint don't worry. He or she knows and figures you will "fold" before he or she does. Usually the dog is right but my fingers are crossed that you'll hang in there.



Brain Drain Vehicles

When introducing any of the following to a dog it is a good idea to initially incorporate an interactive component. Once an interest in the item has been confirmed see if you can engage the dog in a game of find.

At first the toy should be in plain sight and over time making it more difficult but consistently found. This is similar to the Nosey Dogs activity I'll touch on later. As soon as the toy is "found" the game ends and the chewing begins. The purpose for this is to encourage the dog to make an effort to find the chew toy and chew. Something about the hunt increases the appeal for a lot of dogs.

Brain Drain Things I've Had Success With

It varies from dog to dog but here are some ideas.

The Yard – As I mentioned earlier the brain drain vehicle can be tossing food into the yard. It may not seem much to you but wait and see. If it's the only way dinner can be found you'll see a difference right away after the dog has hunted down every last piece of kibble.

The Water Bottle – Many years ago I was called in to a shelter to help a Malamute that for whatever reason was not allowed to leave its kennel. He'd started to go stir-crazy and had chewed through the wire fencing to escaped (successfully) but in the process tore his muzzle up enough to require stitching. They moved him to a kennel with what they hoped was a non-chewable gage. They were right but still he tore open his stitching. I asked them to cut off his food for 24 hours – no treats even and then pour a 1/2 daily serving of good quality kibble into a 1 litre pop bottle without lid or wrapping or the little neck ring that remains when the lid is removed. He had to be watched carefully in the beginning to make sure

he didn't tear off pieces of plastic and ingest them. When he emptied it he got another. He never tried to escape again, healed up and a home was found for him.

Kong Toys – The Wobbler is what I use now instead of water bottles as it's more durable and the dog has to work harder. Pour some kibble in the Wobbler and let the dog figure out how to get it out. My dog hates his kibble as I fed him on a raw diet and from his perspective they don't compare. (He's coming around but he acts like I'd act if it was brussel sprouts every night.) However the first time he knocked a piece of kibble out of the Wobbler (accidentally and only after not eating for 24 hours), he snatched off the floor like he was racing another dog for it, ate it and knocked the Wobbler again. As I'm writing this article he's bashing it around knocking kibble out of it.



Kong's Wobbler

Here's a video that covers it and some other options Kong provides as well.

<http://www.kongcompany.com/webapp/1407989/Retire%20the%20Dog%20Bowl>

Brain Drain Chewing

Outside of hunting for food, constructive chewing should be your brain drain goal number two. Over the years I've noticed that dogs seem their most relaxed when they're chewing on a good bone. I've wondered why and while it's just a guess it's as good as any my thoughts are that it may be hard-wired. In a natural state I think that the level of stress associated with keeping an eye open for an opportunity for a meal, the hunt, the kill and then waiting your turn while normal in terms of typical existence the most stress free period would be after the meal is consumed, tummies are full and all there's left to do is to lay about and chew down the scraps. I think chewing = satisfaction for dogs so I like to find creative ways for them to chew.



The other more commonly known advantage of regular chewing is pretty much the same as regular brushing for us. Encouraging ongoing constructive chewing in a dog's life improves the dog's dental hygiene. The gums are stimulated, tartar accumulates less slowly and there is less risk later in life of complications caused by oral infections.

Chew-Chew-Chew

There are tons of people that can't get their dogs to do it even though there are so many chew toy options. The first problem is often that there are too many options available in the house and the second is that many of the options are not chew friendly. The first piece of know-how is to look for chewables that have appeal to the 3-T's – Tongue, Teeth and Toes. The tongue is for taste the teeth is for chewing and believe it or not the Toes part is equally important. It should be big enough to require bracing with the feet. Again, I don't know why but when it comes to holding attention in my experience it matters.



Kong's Goodie Bone

I go into so many homes on my appointments where it's a venerable Canine ToysRus. Don't make that mistake. Find 6 chewables that appeal to the 3-T's. You might have some already, you might have to do some experimentation. You can always donate the rest to a shelter.

I'm somewhat leery of the rawhide, pigs ears etc., because I've found it impossible to learn what chemicals are used in the process of turning what truly is a raw hide into the end product. There are risks associated although I don't know when you look at the overall number of dogs chowing down on these things vs. the number that get into trouble with them but it's possible once they get into bits, some dogs can be a bit optimistic as to the size of the bit vs. the size of their throat. Some of them definitely have a role in how we're going to engage the dog into chewing but we're going to use them a little differently and incorporate them into other toys so that the dog's interest is kept high but he ingestion amount is limited.

Finally, when it comes to chewables you (and your dog) will get way more mileage out of them if you only keep one out and available. You can have

a couple of the same but keep the others put away. When your dog gets bored of the one you can bring another into rotation. It's like a birthday.

As above, use one at a time and put them in rotation. It varies from dog to dog but in order of what I've seen as preference:

1. **Raw Bone** – You're either for them or against them. I've found nothing beats them for engaging and relaxing a dog so they're my first choice.



Raw Bones
(Marrow Bones from the Butcher Store)

2. **Kong's – Goodie Bone** – The trick is what you put in it. I have had overwhelming success using bull wrinkles shoved in tightly (really tightly) so only 1/4" sticks out on each end. Any more and they're consuming too much. I want them to chew not eat. Warning gets gummy and gross.

3. **Kong's Dental Stick** – Exactly as above

4. **Nyla Bone** – Some take right to them. Personally I have had limited success. However I increased my success rate by giving the new bone to a dog that likes them and after they've chewed them I've given them to the dog. Something about chewing another dog's bone I guess. However my success rate went way up when I drilled a few 1/4" holes down the length and then



Nyla Bones



Hollie Rollers
(I put pig's ears in them)

stuffed it with wet dog food or some sort of food item the dog loves. That helps a lot.

5. I also use a Hollee-roller with some dogs. It depends on the type of chewer they are. I don't want them to chew this open because they're expensive. What I put inside is usually a pig's ear and if the dog is a real challenge I'll put a small hollee-roller inside the bigger one and the pigs ear in the smaller one. They can push and pin it down enough for a nibble (3-T's) but

as soon as they let up it shifts position and they have to go at it again.

All of the above is by no means to be considered exhaustive. There are tons of dog toys I've never even seen. It varies from dog to dog as to which are going to be your 6 rotation toys. Just remember in your search to look for something that you will appeal to the 3-T's.

Nosey Dogs

This is something I stumbled upon a while ago and was so impressed over it not only tired dogs but eased anxiety and built confidence that I started to offer classes to people just to teach it. It's basically a form of the training used to teach dogs how to find narcotics or explosives. I have people come to me for a few weeks, once a week to teach the dog how to



**Ginger the Beagle
Doing Nosey Dogs**

find a treat in more and more challenging ways. After a while I replace the treats with a scent, usually birch oil and reward the dog with the treats or a tug of war when it finds. Over time you can hide it in the most ridiculous places and the dogs will find it. Ceiling fans, in a cupboard, hidden in or around your vehicle etc. The idea is to get the dog using its nose. They love it and it tires the dickens out of them. Eventually my clients just take over from the classes and continue at home. Before they go

to work they hide the scent and send the dog off to find it. By the time they're ready to go out the door the dog has had a few successful searches and is ready for rest. See if you can find a place near you that teaches this activity.

Interactive Toys

What is a good interactive toy for one dog, may not be for another and some dogs and breeds could care less how many times you throw a ball for them other than the amusement they must receive through watching our own efforts trying to convey the concept. There are many fetch toys, some glow in the dark, others float, some have ropes so that you can throw them twice as far and never even have to get out of your chair.

Some dogs may enjoy a good tug of war, which I know many trainers and veterinarians discourage as they feel it can cause aggression in some dogs. Here's my opinion on that. Tug of war in itself does not cause aggression. It can be a component that may encourage it when a dog's owner doesn't have a relationship with the dog in the first place where

respect and the ability to exert self-control as an ongoing component of daily interaction.

In other words if you can't get your dog to walk on a leash without dragging you down the road or do much more than a trick for a treat, then yes, depending on the dog, don't play tug of war. For many dogs, even then tug of war won't encourage aggression, it will be just another thing that will, should they end up with the tug toy, convince them that you may or may not be worth listening to. The best way to determine whether tug of war is a good or bad thing to do is when you tell the dog to let it go, and stop playing. If he or she doesn't, then it's the wrong game.

There are some toys I stay away from, some for health concerns and/or because of ancillary connections that many dogs tend to make. For instance, I stay away from any toy made of fabric. The popular rope toys are typically made of Georgia Cotton, a component found in many of the things an inquisitive pup will find around the home. The loose strands on the ends of the knot are pretty similar to those found on many carpets, pillow edges, etc. Correcting a pup for chewing a carpet's edge and then handing it a rope toy can of course be a confusing message.

The same goes for any product that can easily be rendered into pieces such as stuffed animals and squeaky toys. There is also an ingestion concern. I don't recommend another common dog toy; tennis balls, as they can encourage the pulling of threads out of carpets. However, much more important is that over time, tennis balls wear the enamel from a dog's teeth and dental issues are one of the most common threats to a dog's life later in life, due to the risk of infection transfer from mouth to heart.

If you found this information useful you'll enjoy my weekly newsletter. I try to keep a balance between being short and sweet. You can receive it by visiting here. [Ask the Dog Guy's Weekly Newsletter](#)

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Wade". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

John "Ask the Dog Guy" Wade