

Scratching The Surface: Sports Foundation Games For Your Puppy's Mind And Body

These games are put together to focus on a few things. Confidence in experiencing all sorts of new sights/sounds/textures. Resiliency in recovering from an uncomfortable or new situation. Exposure to fitness equipment so the first time they see an item is not when they are in rehab (which is the hardest time to teach physically). And most importantly to continue to develop/strengthen the nerves in the paws that send information to the brain.

PreReqs - Please research Leslie McDevitt "Pattern Games". My favorite games are Up/Down, 123 Walking, and Ping Pong. I recommend you have at least 2 or 3 games in your pocket to help your dog show resiliency through something default and comfortable if and when they were to ever feel uncomfortable. It could be through something in this series - or something out in the real world.

How To Play

Depending on your dog or puppy, you can pick and choose 3-7 games to set up and move through like a course. I spend about 1 min at each game, and plan to either go back through a second/third time after a short break (or later in the day if you can leave them setup). As this is targeted for puppies (but not limited to), their attention span is typically shorter. And if you limit the time they encounter a game that they believe is spooky/scary, then the encounter is brief/positive, they move on, and then you can come back through again.

The dog's always get to make the decisions, you are never to force them to interact with anything. Be kind and understanding, providing comfort/support if your dog is struggling and cheerlead them to becoming stronger and confident from the inside out.

Game 1 - Peek-A-Boo Tent

Using a child's tent, you can toss treats in/out to encourage your dog to enter and exit on their own. Feeding several cookies behind the tent will allow you time to run around and duck into the tent for a game of hide & seek. You can also lower the zipper to increase the pressure and challenge your dog to still enter while brushing past the feel of the fabric.

Alternative Setup - Draping a flat sheet or blanket on chairs. Think of how to make a childhood fort for your dog!

Game 2 - Crinkle Paper + Jingle Bells Search

Using a large bowl, tie up some jingle bells (so they can't be accidentally ingested) and crumple up paper (such as packing paper, wrapping paper, or construction paper). I laid a few around the bowl in a moat and tossed the treats in the bowl for the dog to sniff out in a fun search.

Alternative Setup - try to find something polar opposite from the paper, perhaps metal wrenches from the workshop, a handful of metal spoons that would clink around in the bucket. Get creative to find something that will make noise when bumped together so when your dog noses around to treats - they create some noise!

Game 3 - Friendly Cat

Find a friend with a cat or kitten that is preferably dog savvy. In my example, the cat is free to move about and can leave/take breaks as needed. It's helpful for a nervous puppy to see you pet the cat/kitten and then be able to sniff/smell your hand. As the cat might interact and come closer to you, your dog may decide to interact. They may also prefer to stay back and observe, which is 100% fine and positive. Do be cautious in avoiding a cat claw to the face/eye. I often allow the puppies to sniff the cat from the rear so the wildly exciting novelty wears off and they can then focus on watching and deciding how to interact with the cat. You can utilize the same method to meet with reptiles, birds, some livestock, etc.

Alternative Setup - If you don't have a friend to visit with cat(s) you could take a trip to PetSmart/Petco and let your dog view the adoptable cat cages. Or volunteer at the shelter and come home smelling of lots of cats. I tend not to draw attention to cats in the neighborhood because those situations often draw out more prey drive versus calmer meet & greets inside of a home/business.

Game 4 - Party Streamer Crawl

Throw a party with adhesive curly ribbon bows. I turned a table on its side to get a low enough height that the ribbons would dangle onto my dog. You can go lower with a coffee table or under a chair, to really encourage an army crawl from your dog. This

helps with body and situational awareness if they were to ever get themselves in a pickle down the road.

Alternative SetUp - Coffee table, dining chair, elevated klimb, or even under the bed. Feel free to add a blanket/towel to drape on one or both ends as your dog becomes brave about driving forward to crawl into the dark cave.

Game 5 - Wobble Climb

Combine a platform with an obstacle object such as an inflatable fitness bone/disc, or use a scrunchable household object like a sofa cushion or pillow. This will create a beginner level of instability - while keeping the height low to the ground. If the dog is nervous and chooses to abort - it's an easy hop off. Add in a small step to further encourage your dog to think about foot placement as they move through this miniature obstacle course.

Alternative Setup: see above

Game 6 - Skateboard

Using a skateboard (box store or second hand thrifted) make sure to stabilize one end as you ask your dog to step up. This will prevent it from sliding out from underneath them and potentially causing an injury. Slowly adjust your foot to allow the board to move towards you. This is not an expert level skateboarding trick, just allowing your dog to feel confident as they roll slowly along and discover their back legs can propel them.

Alternative Setup: Furniture dolly (often used for moving Flyball boxes), kids sitting scooter, workshop roll-a-round stools or under the car rolling unit.

Game 7 - Music Mat

Utilize a textured play "musical mat" that feels similar to a crinkle dog toy. This mat also plays musical instruments or songs based on the locations that are pressed. You can introduce your dog to the music mat while the mat sound is turned off just so they can feel the crinkle, and then later introduce them to the idea that their contact produces a musical loud sound. These mats often have a volume control that you can raise/lower as needed.

Game 8 - Water Bottle + Plastic Bag Search

Saving your old plastic grocery bags and water bottles - toss them into one area for your dog to have a plastic pit to hunt in. *Safety tip - cut the handles off the plastic bags & closely supervise your dog. Use large chunks of food as it can be quite a hunt depending on the layers you have built up.

Alternative Setup: Toss your collected items into a tub/shower (now the tub is a FUN place!), or even fill up a dog crate and have your dog go in/out. You can substitute the bottles/bags for plastic balls, cardboard boxes, etc. Get really creative and you can make this one into multiple exercises.

Game 9 - Tickle Puppy/Car Wash

Combining Zip Ties with Styrofoam you can simulate a “car wash” to tickle your dog on their sides or feet. Make the chute as wide or narrow as your dog will tolerate. You can also adjust the height angle of the zip ties to brush higher towards the shoulders or lower on the feet.

*To speed up the building process - I pre-punched the holes with a screwdriver, and then pushed in the zip ties (which were still perfect to be used after this game).

Alternative Setup: You could punch/push zip ties into the side of a cardboard box.

Game 10 - Tunnel

Using a small kids tunnel or a shortened agility tunnel, allow your dog to enter and exit as they are comfortable. This is not a game of speed and if they turn around inside the tunnel that is okay. If you toss a cookie through the end of the tunnel they will likely exit and come back around to the start. If you have two people, one can hold while the other calls from the exit of the tunnel. Then turn the dog around and repeat in the opposite direction.

Alternative Setup: Create a fort/tunnel out of blankets or sheets at home using sofa tables, coffee tables, or dining chairs. Imagine a kid playing fort and simulate a small fort for your dog to conquer.

Game 11 - Killer Caterpillar

Seen here is the “Fisher Price Think & Learn Code-a-Pillar Toy” that can be programmed to do a sequence of songs, chirps, and movements such as turning or moving forward. Majority of the dogs that saw this for the first time were terrified. It gave us the chance to utilize the Control Unleashed games that were solid from working at home, to help our pups gain confidence that this was not something to obsess on or fear. For dogs that were nervous - we immediately increased the distance from the caterpillar and worked other tricks and games to maintain focus while the caterpillar did its thing several feet away. Often those dogs would continue to work closer and closer near the caterpillar and would ignore it completely (which was fine - we didn't need them to interact with it).

Alternative Setup: Any kind of toy that would move/talk when you press the button.

Game 12 - Inflatables Walk the Plank

Using a combination of inflatables and a plank, this is an excellent way to introduce our dogs to fitness equipment. It's helpful for them to grasp the concept of interacting with these pieces should they ever need fitness or rehab in the future. Use the plank as the point to slow your dog down and stop them by feeding a cookie. You do not want them to be eating on inflatables as they are following their nose and not paying attention (more likely to slip). Notice that I only feed on the plank in both directions (and my dog was moving way too fast!)

Alternative Setup: Inflatables can be substituted with disc inflatables, pillows or couch cushions. The aerobic bench could be a cato or other solid surface.

Game 13 - Bubble Wrap

Simply tape down packing bubble wrap to the ground. For smaller dog's, you might have to play a game of tug or ask them to jump up in order to get them to weigh enough to pop the bubble wrap with their own body weight (or try again when they are a little older and weigh more).

Game 14 - Inflatable Diving Board

Combine together a bosu ball and a cato tilt plank. The plank here is stationary, but for a more advanced challenge you could put the cato on the bosu ball as long as it would not slip in any direction under your dog's weight. As a reminder - try to walk your dog to the end of the plank, stop/feed them, then ask for a walk across the ball (repeating the opposite direction feeding on the plank after walking across the ball).

Alternative Setup: Cato plank can be substituted for a hit it board, aerobic bench, or any flat solid surface. The bosu ball could be swapped for an inflatable donut (with base), secured inflatable peanut, large sofa cushion or similar unstable object.

Game 15 - Crunchy Walk

Getting some giant off-brand bags of cereal from the store and line boxes or cookie sheet trays with generic aluminum foil. Make sure the foil is not flattened down, but has some raised edges/bubbles to be compressed when walking on. The cereal should still be edible and the aluminum foil can be balled up and used to scrub down your BBQ grill plates before tossing (recycle when we can!).

Alternative Setup: You can use other items with crunchy textures like pasta, popcorn, chips etc and put them in a gallon ziploc if their original container has too much air. Parchment paper could also be used!

Game 16 - Gravel Pit

No need to purchase gravel like I did, but take the time to notice and walk over all sorts of hard rock, smooth pebbles, etc. You might have luck at breweries/wineries, farm stores, or other “agricultural” type locations that would likely have a gravel road, pathways, etc.

Game 17 - Water Hole

Using a kids swimming pool, dock diving or regular pool with a ramp, let your dog dip their toes into the water. If they refuse to get in, you can cup some water and rub it on their leg, or offer to them to sniff. Often if I am in the middle, my dog is right behind so take off your shoes for a dip as well. Using the buddy system can also be advantageous for gaining the confidence for a new activity.

Alternative Setup: Take a detour on a rainy day to walk through puddles, or set up a kids splash pad.

Game 18 - Arctic Walk

Using frozen ice packs (I had the large ones that come in meal prep kits or dog food deliveries) you can lay them out in a line or spread out in stations. If your dog has targeting behavior you can play around with front and rear foot targets - or just walk on and off exposing both the front and rear to cold texture.

Alternative Setup: Freeze a cookie sheet of water in a large freezer if you are able and lay down the cookie sheet. Just make sure as it starts to melt it might become slippery and you want to avoid a slip/fall. You could also fill a shallow box or swimming pool with ice cubes from the freezer dispenser or purchase a bag of ice.

Game 19 - Walking/Trotting Cavalettis

Setup between 3-6 poles for your dog to walk over. Here are some guidelines on how to set up this exercise.

-Height of your dog's withers = spacing between the poles/cones.

-Height of the poles = $\frac{1}{2}$ the height of the hock and not to exceed the height of the hock.

We want our dogs to see this slowly to start - so you might start with just 2-3 pole setups and the pole on the ground. Build up the height, and then add more poles to keep their confidence. When you go into the poles - you do not lure with food. You can show them

the treat before, but allow them the opportunity to look down and notice the equipment while following beside you. A sit/stay on one end while you go to the opposite can also be used but this isn't a fast exercise. Slow and thoughtful!

Alertivative Setup: You can use broom sticks from the dollar store and stack them up on books/bricks/boxes for the height you need.

Game 20 - Hide & Seek Recalls

If you have an extra person and your dog is not adverse to being held - you can have your dog restrained while you run away to disappear behind a tarp. Have the releaser let go as soon as you are gone from sight. If needed you can keep calling your dog and reward (food or tug or ball) them as soon as they turn to make eye contact with you. It won't be uncommon for them to blow WAY past you the first time with a lot of speed, but once they learn the game they will start to decelerate before turning around the corner (which translates to decelerating/shifting weight to the rear before hitting the box).

Alternative Setup: If you don't have a helper or your dog hates being held - you can toss a frisbee/toy in one direction and run in the opposite. Just make sure they see you run/hide so it wasn't a total magic act. You can also use a bowl of food to buy you time - but do not call your dog off early and risk them running with a treat that hasn't been swallowed yet.

Game 21 - Balloons

Grabbing some helium aluminum balloons that are less likely to pop - shorten them so they are closer to the height of your dog's shoulder, withers, and head. Walk in and around the balloons being careful not to allow your dog's leash to get tangled in a balloon (see video of what not to do). Practice nudging the balloon with your dog's body as you turn them, as well as lifting the balloon and having it bounce back into place. Don't be shocked if curiosity turns into play time and your dog wants to pop the balloon.

Additional Creative Inspiration - Keep Playing!

Frozen stiff towel

Wobble Board

Crawl under tables/beds/sofas

Sand Pit

Tarp (Walk over/under/hide under/roll yourself like a burrito)

Yoga Mat

Foam Balance Pads

Bean Bag
Rice
Wrapping paper
Tissue paper
Paper towels
Sandpaper
Wooden Two by fours (walk any direction on or over)
Leaf Blower
Kids handing out cookies
Shredded Paper
Aluminum pans
Water bottles filled with bells or rice
Frozen water bottles
Cat/Kittens
Kids (school drop offs in the morning are calmer than pickups in the afternoon)
Elevate or wobble anything - be creative
Inflatables
Umbrella
Dropping Plastic Cups/walking through them
Junkyard Walk - Put a pile of different objects out and have your dog walk back and forth or figure 8 over the items.