

# Put Away Those Food Bowls and Let's Give Dogs a Job!



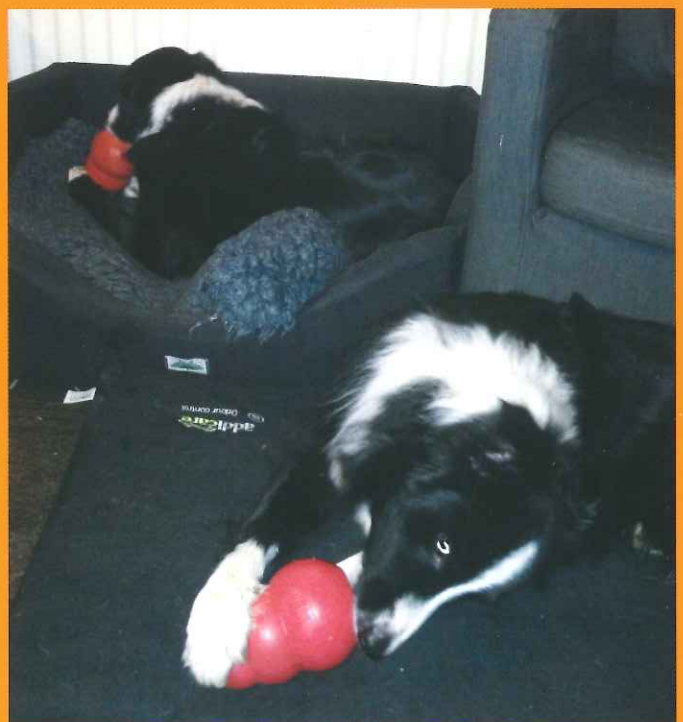
As part of my behaviour consultations, clients fill out a questionnaire. This is designed to give me a more detailed profile of the dog and family I'm visiting, as well as outlining the challenges they're having. What's clear from almost all clients is that while most of the dogs I work with get ample physical exercise, mental stimulation is profoundly lacking.

All dogs were originally bred to do a job. Yet in the average pet dog household, unemployment, or the absence of a project to keep pup occupied, causes no end of problems for clients on a day to day basis. The result is dogs who go freelance, look for mischief around the house in order to stave off the endless hours of boredom before their next walk. This can include chewing, digging, excessive patrolling and/or guarding, counter surfing, demanding attention from owners (who more often than not play the game by responding), stealing items, barking and pacing.

Now I know that some clients want a magic wand to fix their dog problems. The closest I've come to discovering that magic wand, is the art of making a dog work for their food. Such a technique can result in the reduction, if not complete alleviation of many of the boredom related challenges listed above. Offering a dog his meals from a bowl, to be inhaled in the space of minutes or even seconds, leaves a mischief shaped chasm which any keen dog will gladly fill with carnage and mayhem. Ensuring a dog gets mental as well as physical exercise should mean he has far less energy to cause trouble.

A dog who tries to work out where his food is coming from and how he can go about getting to his prize is hunting, and domestic dogs thoroughly enjoy this activity. By offering dogs

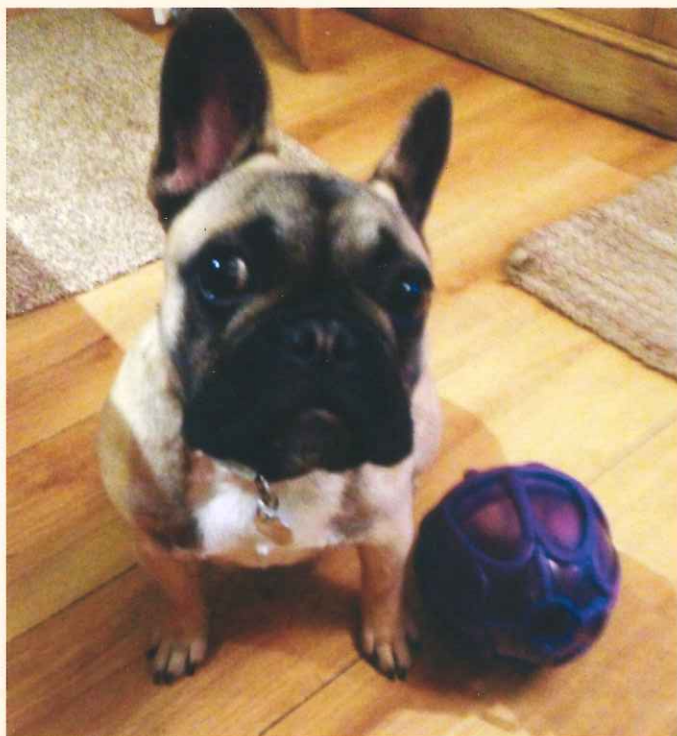
the opportunity to work for their food, the dog gets an outlet for his natural hunting instinct and chewing habits, giving him a job to do and using up mental energy. Physiologically, hunting for food is extremely satisfying yet terribly tiring. During the hunt, feel good chemicals known as endorphins are released, as



well as adrenalin and cortisol, all of which keep the dog alert and active to the prey. However following this, lying down and eating the prize has a soporific effect, as the dog crashes from all the excitement and 'comes down' from his hunting high. In domestic dog terms, this should appeal to owners, whose dogs first spend time working for their food and then sleep and stay out of mischief until the next meal or walk opportunity. Several hunting events daily, in addition to the usual physical exercises suited to each individual breed should result in a dog with less energy to get into trouble around the house.

The general rule when starting a dog on a hunting project is that novice dogs should get their prize without very much effort (high reinforcement) so that they will be keen to persevere as they become expert hunters. Owners can then make the hunt more and more difficult and/or exciting. I suggest hiding food around the house/garden, within cardboard boxes or under plant pots, laying 'Hansel and Gretel' type tracks for your dog to follow with food dropped along the way. What about scatter feeding kibble across a grassy lawn, just like you'd feed chickens in a farm yard? Those owners who raw feed, offer meaty bones as the ultimate hunt prize, or a hunk of frozen meat which takes almost as long to chew through. This video explains how to pack a fun filled adventure box for dogs, using their natural hunting instinct to search for their meals. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_detailpage&v=8ALvDXUsDQM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=8ALvDXUsDQM)

Over the years, I've tried many custom-made food dispensing products, some with greater effect than others. My favourite product is still the original Kong. Other products which get the thumbs up include the Premier Nibble Kibble and the Company of Animals Green Feeder. The countless recipes online for Kong stuffing and freezing the stuffed Kong for experienced hunters, ensure they spend longer working for their prize.



Once owner and dog have got the hang of the new routine, there are some highly imaginative ways to keep your dog occupied hunting for his meals. My training colleague Anne Rogers has compiled a comprehensive list of environmental enrichment for dogs at feeding time and the article can be found here: <http://pawsitivedawgs.wordpress.com/2012/04/13/enrichments/>

In most cases, stuffing a consumable inside a non-consumable will mean the dog concentrates on the food, rather than chewing the object in question, but as all dogs differ, it's wise to supervise any dog unless their chewing habit is well known to the owner. Finally, owners of highly stressed dogs, dogs who resource guard or dogs with frustration/self control issues should consult their canine behaviourist before beginning any meal time hunting programme. The old adage that 'a tired dog is a happy dog' applies when our clever canine friends have a suitable balance of both mental and physical exercise. Most domestic dogs I see get plenty of walks, but most are also chronically bored. Giving a dog the chance to hunt for their food is a simple and easy way for mental energy to be safely used up. It should mean peace and quiet for the owner and a less troublesome pet dog as a result.

### Sue McCabe

Sue McCabe (APDT UK 00956) runs Muttamorphosis Dog Training & Behaviour in Newcastle upon Tyne. She teaches puppy socialisation classes, as well as the Kennel Club Good Citizen Dog Scheme to Gold level. She also teaches clicker classes. Sue is a referral trainer and behaviourist for numerous city vet practices. She shares her house with two rescue Border Collies – one of whom she hand reared – and three cats.

