

# Using puzzle toys for mental stimulation

a guide for dog owners, from



**Your dog is bored. You're busy.**

Give your dog a mental workout and give yourself a break!



## How food bowls cause behavior problems

Wild dog species and stray domestic dogs spend 90% of their waking hours searching for food. If you feed your dog by putting his food down in a bowl, he'll figure out on his own what to do with all his extra time and energy. Popular canine pastimes include: chewing clothes or furniture, barking at nothing, destroying the house or yard, begging incessantly for attention or play, and the list goes on.

## An easy solution

Ideally, you can wear your dog out with physical exercise and/or training games on a daily basis, but for especially busy owners, bad weather days, or for hyper dogs who just need a little extra activity, puzzle toys are a great way to stimulate your dog and take the edge off. Canine brains, like human brains, utilize energy faster than any other organ, so exercising your dog's brain (as well as the physical skills required by most puzzle toys) is a great, efficient way to alleviate nuisance behaviors caused by boredom. Plus, it entertains your dog for a while and gives you a break from policing your dog's behavior.

Just about any puzzle toy – meaning a toy that can hold food and requires a dog to do some kind of 'work' to get it out – can be beneficial. Even better, according to our experience training thousands of dogs and using puzzle toys on a daily basis, are the ones that are fast and easy for owners to use and can

hold up against strong chewers. Here are some of our favorites, how they work, and what we like about them:

## Our recommendations

(Note: We are not officially affiliated with any of the following products – the only benefit we get from the sales of these products is the satisfaction from improving the lives of dogs and their owners!)

### Kong Wobbler



- The bottom is weighted so dogs have to knock it over repeatedly to get food to fall out of the hole.
- Its shape and texture make it almost impossible for dogs to apply their full jaw pressure, making it a good choice for extreme chewers.
- The top unscrews from the bottom, making it fast and easy to fill with food.
- Comes in two sizes with moderate to high food capacity.

### PetSafe Busy Buddy Magic Mushroom



- Dogs have to topple the toy to make food fall through the holes in the “bulb” into the “dish” then tip it again or roll it to get the food.
- Adjustable hole size allows you to vary the difficulty up or down whenever you’d like.
- The top unscrews from the bottom, making it fast and easy to fill with food.
- Comes in two sizes with low to moderate food capacity.

### Snuffle Mat



- Food can be scattered into the many flaps and folds – dogs tap into their foraging instincts to sniff out each piece.
- Many of these are handmade. Some, like the one pictured here, are very fast and easy to fill.
- Wide variety available with moderate to high food capacity.

### PetSafe Busy Buddy Kibble Nibble



- Dogs have to roll the toy around to knock food out the holes in the top and bottom. The egg shape makes it a little more challenging than a spherical treat ball.
- Its shape makes it difficult for dogs to apply their full jaw pressure, making it a good choice for extreme chewers.
- Rubber “teeth” line the holes and can be cut to adjust the difficulty.
- Twists apart, making it fast and easy to fill.
- Comes in two sizes with moderate to high food capacity.

### Kong Gyro



- Dogs have to rotate the inner sphere and/or flip the toy over to knock food out of the hole.
- The outside ring is that new rubbery foam material that is easy to puncture but hard to tear.
- Center twists open making it fast and easy to fill.
- Comes in two sizes with low to moderate food capacity.

### PetSafe Busy Buddy Twist ‘n Treat



- Dogs have to flip or spin the toy to make food fall out of the holes or opening, or have to burrow the food out, depending on how you fill it and close it.
- Pieces twist apart making it fast and easy to fill.
- You can modify the game and difficulty by using different sizes of food and/or closing it more or less.
- Comes in two sizes with low to moderate food capacity.

## Kong Classic



- Dogs have to burrow out food stuffed in the toy.
- Can take longer to prepare well, but offers endless stuffing technique choices. (Look up “How to stuff a Kong” and you’ll find a million recipes ranging in difficulty from easy to nearly impossible.)
- There are versions made of harder rubber for extreme chewers (black color) and softer rubber for puppies and seniors (blue, pink, and purple)

### Tips and Tricks:

- Get the largest size that your dog can still manipulate. Larger food capacity = longer play time and more “yah-yahs” gotten out. We feed nearly all of our dogs’ regular meals out of a puzzle toy.
- To start, make the toy interesting to play with (by using yummy treats) and easy to win (using small pieces that will easily fall out), then increase the difficulty as your dog becomes a skilled enthusiast.
- Always supervise your dog’s interaction with any toy until you know they interact with it safely.
- If you confine your dog in a crate, pen, or room, puzzle toys can help make alone time more enjoyable (just be careful not to fill your dog up on food and leave him or her without a potty for very long). For more information about using puzzle toys to ease separation issues, contact us (information below) for our Puppy Start Guide or Separation Anxiety Reversal Guide.
- If your dog guards food or toys, know that puzzle toys can be another valuable resource he may try to guard (whether they have food in them or not). If your dog guards resources, contact us (information below) for our guide on Resource Guarding Management or to discuss training options.

If you have questions or concerns about using puzzle toys with your dog, or about your dog’s behavior in general, contact us at [720-285-9978](tel:720-285-9978) or [contact@palsdogtraining.com](mailto:contact@palsdogtraining.com) - we’ll assess your situation and help match you with the best solution.