

Happy Dogs!

Learning through play

by

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Introduction

Whether you've just welcomed your first puppy home or you've been lucky enough to share your life with dogs for years, we all want exactly the same thing: a dog who is happy in their skin, healthy in body and mind, and an absolute pleasure to live with.

The thing is, dogs don't arrive with an instruction booklet. Each one is a one-of-a-kind mix of personality, energy, and hilarious little quirks that make them completely irresistible... and occasionally a tiny bit tricky.

That's why I wrote this guide. Think of it as a friend sitting on your coffee table, ready to help whenever you need it. We'll learn to "speak dog" together, turn playtime into clever training moments, and gently smooth out the everyday bumps (jumping up, pulling on the lead, the midnight zoomies) without ever losing the joy or kindness.

So go and grab a handful of your dog's favourite treats (and maybe a couple of biscuits for yourself), settle down somewhere comfy, and let's begin the adventure of building an even happier life together.

Part 1 | Foundations

Understanding Your Canine Companion

Dogs are so much more than fluffy faces and wagging tails. They are clever, sensitive souls who feel the world deeply. The better we understand how they think and feel, the easier (and more fun) everything else becomes.

What really makes a dog happy?

Have you ever watched your dog's whole body explode with happiness the moment you pick up the lead or their favourite squeaky toy? That full-body wiggle isn't an accident. Dogs are built to feel their very best when they get three simple things every single day:

- plenty of physical exercise
- interesting things to think about and do
- loving time with their favourite people (that's you!)

When those needs are met, you get a calm, contented dog who has absolutely no interest in eating your sofa. Miss out on them and boredom creeps in, quickly followed by

chewed shoes, hole-digging projects, or crazy bark-a-thons.

The lovely truth is this: tired dogs who have used their brains are happy dogs... and happy dogs are good dogs.

Learning to read your dog's silent language

Dogs are talking to us all day long. They just don't use words.

Instead they have this rich, whole-body language that is honest, subtle, and (once you know what to look for) surprisingly easy to understand. Learning it is like being handed a secret decoder ring to your best friend's heart and mind. Suddenly you know when they're blissfully happy, quietly worried, bursting with playfulness, or politely asking for space, long before they ever bark, growl, or jump.

Let's go on a gentle tour from nose to tail (and everything in between) so you can start having proper conversations with your dog today.

The Tail – the one everyone notices first

We all recognise the wild helicopter wag that means “You’re home! Life is perfect!” But tails say so much more:

- A relaxed, wide, sweeping wag at mid-height = “I’m happy and comfortable right now.”
- fast wag with the whole bum swinging = pure joy and excitement (often accompanied by happy little hops).
- high, stiff wag that’s moving quite slowly = “I’m on alert. I’m not sure about this person/situation yet.”
- very high and vibrating like a rattlesnake = arousal is high; this can tip into over-excitement or even a warning.
- tail tucked tightly under the belly = “I’m scared, worried, or trying to look small.”
- slow, low wag while the body is stiff = “I’m not comfortable, please give me a moment.”

Top tip: always look at the tail together with the rest of the body. A wagging tail does not automatically mean a friendly dog!

Ears – mood antennae

Ears are wonderfully expressive once you start noticing them.

- Forward and perked = curiosity, interest, or excitement (“What’s that noise? Is it dinner?”).
- Slightly pulled back but still relaxed = friendly and attentive.
- Flattened hard against the head = fear, anxiety, or submission (“I’m trying to look as unthreatening as possible”).
- One ear forward, one back = “I’m listening to two things at once” (very common when they’re trying to keep track of you and something else interesting).

Eyes and face – the window to their heart

Soft, slightly squinty eyes and a loose, gently open mouth = the classic relaxed, happy face we all love.

But watch for these softer signals:

- Whale eye (you can see the whites) = discomfort or worry.
- Hard stare with a still body = “I’m watching this

very carefully.”

- Quick lip-lick or nose-lick when nothing tasty is around = “I’m a bit stressed.”
- Yawning when they’re not tired = another calming signal, like taking a deep breath to settle themselves.
- Looking or turning the head away = the politest way a dog can say “Please, a little space would be lovely.”

These tiny gestures are your dog’s way of trying to keep the peace. When we notice and respond (by backing off, speaking softly, or changing the situation), we teach them that we’re trustworthy listeners.

Whole-body posture – the full picture

A relaxed dog looks loose and wiggly, weight evenly spread, maybe even doing a happy stretch or rolling over on their side for a belly rub.

A worried or unsure dog might:

- freeze completely (a very big signal we sometimes miss)
- lower their body or crouch

- shift their weight backwards
- lean away slightly

And then there's the glorious play-bow: front legs stretched forward, chest near the ground, bum in the air, tail wagging like mad. This is the universal dog invitation: "Everything I do next is just fun, chase me!"

Stress and calming signals – the polite little hints

Dogs are natural peace-keepers. When they feel even a tiny bit overwhelmed they often give a string of gentle calming signals to say "Let's all stay calm, okay?" Common ones are:

- lip-licking
- yawning
- sniffing the ground suddenly
- shaking off as if wet (when they're dry)
- turning their head or whole body away
- lifting one front paw
- blinking slowly

If you see a cluster of these (say, a yawn, a lip-lick, and looking away all in ten seconds), your dog is quietly

asking you or another dog to ease the pressure. The kindest thing we can do is listen, give them a moment, lower our voice, or remove whatever is worrying them.

Putting it all together – a couple of real-life examples

Imagine you're at the park. A dog approaches yours with a very high, stiff tail, slow stiff wag, forward ears, and a hard stare. Even though the tail is moving, this dog is saying "Please approach slowly, I'm not sure yet."

Now picture your own dog at the vet: ears back, tail low or tucked, whale eye, lip-licking, and maybe a big yawn in the waiting room. They're telling you "This place makes me nervous, can you help me feel safe?"

The more you practise watching, the more you'll spot these conversations happening everywhere: between dogs at the park, between your dog and visiting children, even between your dog and you when you're rushing out the door.

A gentle note about hugs

Please teach everyone who meets your dog –

especially excited children and well-meaning adults – that wrapping arms tightly around a dog and squeezing is not the loving gesture we humans think it is.

To most dogs, being hugged hard feels trapping and frightening; their movement is restricted, their breathing can feel squashed, and they have no polite way to escape. A worried dog will first try to wriggle free or give tiny calming signals (lip-licking, yawning, looking away).

If those signals are missed, the next step can be a quick nip or air-snap – not because they’re “naughty”, but because they’re scared and trying to say “Please let me go!”

Instead, show children how to let the dog choose the contact: crouch down to dog level, offer a loose fist to sniff, gentle strokes under the chin or along the chest, and stop the moment the dog leans away or turns their head.

A dog who is allowed to approach, sniff, and leave whenever they want will happily stay for cuddles on their own terms – and that’s the safest, happiest cuddle of all.

Resources to go deeper

If you'd like beautiful pictures and short, clear explanations, I always recommend two little treasures:

- Doggie Language by Lili Chin – an illustrated love letter to dog body language.
- On Talking Terms with Dogs: Calming Signals by Turid Rugaas – the classic that started it all.

But honestly, the very best teacher is simply time spent quietly watching your own dog in different places and moods. After a week or two you'll be amazed how fluent you become.

When we start listening to this silent language, something magical happens. Misunderstandings melt away. Trust grows. And suddenly you have a deeper, calmer, happier relationship than you ever thought possible.

That's the foundation everything else in this guide is built on: seeing the world through your dog's eyes, hearing what they're really saying, and answering with kindness.

How dogs understand us (and why it's mostly not the words we say)

We chatter to our dogs all day long, sometimes in proper sentences, sometimes in ridiculous baby-talk. They adore it, but here's what they actually hear:

Your tone of voice is huge. That high, sing-song “Who’s the best dog in the world?” makes tails wag even if the sentence is “We’re going to the vet!” A calm, low, steady tone says “I’ve got this” far better than the word “No” ever could.

Your body talks even louder. Point at something and most dogs follow your finger. Lean over them stiffly and they shrink. Crouch down with open arms and they come running.

Consistency feels like love. If “Sit” always sounds the same and looks the same (maybe a little hand signal too), your dog learns lightning-fast. Mixed messages are just confusing, like someone changing the rules of a game halfway through.

Your emotions are contagious. Dogs are emotional sponges. Come home relaxed and smiling and your dog mirrors that joy. Stomp in, cross and tense and, without meaning to, you'll have a worried dog on your hands. Calm is catching, in the very best way.

How dogs actually learn new things

Dogs don't learn by being told off or by long lectures. They learn through kind, clear steps that make them feel happy:

1. We help them connect a word with an action (luring with a treat or catching it when they offer it naturally).
2. We practise the same thing lots of times, always in a happy, short burst.
3. The instant they get it right, we mark it with a cheerful "Yes!" (or a clicker) and give something wonderful, food, praise, a quick game.
4. Once they know it at home, we practise in the garden, then the park, then near other dogs, slowly making it real-life proof.
5. Finally we mix it with other things they know and slowly reduce the treats so the behaviour sticks for

life.

Do this with patience and joy and almost any dog can learn almost anything.

The power of positive reinforcement

Positive reinforcement simply means: notice what you like and make it worth repeating. It's not "letting them get away with things", it's the fastest, kindest, most reliable way to teach dogs (and science backs it up again and again).

When good behaviour gets rewarded with something the dog loves, that behaviour grows. When unwanted behaviour gets calmly ignored or gently redirected, it fades away. No fear, no shouting, no confusion, just clear, happy communication wrapped in fun.

Part 2 | Essential Life Skills Through Play

You now know how your dog thinks, feels, and talks without words.

Now let's turn that understanding into real-life magic. The eight skills on the next few pages are the ones that make the biggest difference to everyday happiness: polite greetings, peaceful walks, coming when called even when a squirrel is involved, and a rock-solid "off-switch" for calm moments.

The very best bit? Every single one is taught through tiny, joyful games that take less than two or three minutes, several times a day. No drills, no stern voices, no boredom, just play that happens to build brilliant manners.

Safety Guidelines

Ensure a safe environment for play and enrichment:

- Always supervise your dog during activities to prevent accidents.
- Choose age-appropriate toys and games to avoid choking hazards.
- Avoid overexertion, especially in hot weather or with brachycephalic breeds.
- For puzzle toys, start with easier options before

progressing to more challenging ones.

- Use only dog-safe, non-toxic substances for scent games.

Age-Specific Training Recommendations

Tailor your training approach based on your dog's life stage:

- **Puppies (0-1 year):** Focus on socialisation, basic obedience, and short, frequent play sessions. Use soft toys and low-impact games to protect developing joints.
- **Adult Dogs (1-7 years):** Engage in more complex games and training exercises. Incorporate agility training, advanced obedience tasks, and mentally stimulating activities.
- **Senior Dogs (7+ years):** Adapt games for reduced mobility or sensory changes. Emphasise gentle exercise, scent work, and puzzle toys to keep their minds sharp.

Breed-Specific Recommendations

Different dog breeds exhibit unique

characteristics, energy levels, and learning styles.

Tailoring your training approach to suit these differences can lead to more effective results.

- **High-Energy Breeds** (e.g., Border Collies, Australian Shepherds): Focus on mentally stimulating activities such as advanced agility courses and complex scent work to channel their energy effectively.
- **Scent-Driven Breeds** (e.g., Beagles, Bloodhounds): Emphasise nose work games and tracking activities that cater to their natural hunting instincts.
- **Water-Loving Breeds** (e.g., Spaniels, Labrador Retrievers, Portuguese Water Dogs): Incorporate water-based games like retrieving toys from a pool or playing in a sprinkler.
- **Guardian Breeds** (e.g., German Shepherds, Rottweilers): Include games that satisfy their protective instincts, such as supervised search and rescue activities.

Troubleshooting Common Challenges

Address frequent issues encountered during play-based training:

- **Over-excitement:** If your dog becomes too aroused during play, introduce calming exercises or take breaks to relax between games.
- **Lack of Focus:** Use shorter play sessions and gradually increase duration as your dog's attention span improves.
- **Reluctance to Engage:** Experiment with different toys, treats, or games to discover what motivates your dog most.

Ready for the Games?

1. The Name Game – teaching “When I say your name, the best things happen”

This is the foundation of everything else. A dog who spins toward you the moment they hear their name is a dog who is easy to keep safe and lovely to live with.

How to play

Scatter little games throughout the day (while the kettle boils, during TV adverts, when you're waiting for the toast).

1. Say your dog's name once, in your happiest, most excited voice.
2. The very instant their eyes or ears flick toward you, say "Yes!" (or click) and deliver something wonderful: a tasty treat, a quick scratch, a thrown toy, or an excited "Good dog, let's party!"
3. Take one step away and repeat.

That's it. Five or six repetitions, four or five times a day. Within a week most dogs start whipping their heads round at the sound of their name like it's the most exciting word in the universe. Once it's strong at home, practise in the garden, then in the park, always keeping the reward fabulous. A solid name response is the kindest safety net you'll ever give your dog.

2. Hand-Touch – the magic “come here” without ever saying come

A simple nose-boop to your palm can move your dog away from the door, call them out of the garden, or stop

them jumping on guests, all with a smile.

How to play

Hold your flat hand about six inches from their nose.

Most dogs will reach out to sniff. The moment their nose touches your palm, “Yes!” and reward.

After just a few tries, add the word “Touch”.

Then start moving your hand farther away, higher, lower, around corners. Before you know it you have a lightning-fast, happy recall that works even when they’re busy sniffing something fascinating.

3. Auto-Sit (or “Say Please by Sitting”)

Jumping up, barging through doors, and demanding attention all vanish when sitting becomes the polite way to ask for anything nice.

How to play

Simply wait.

Before every good thing (dinner bowl going down, lead being clipped on, ball about to be thrown, front door opening, cuddles starting) pause and look expectant.

The second your dog’s bottom touches the floor, the wonderful thing happens. No word needed at first; they work it out in a day or two and start offering sits like a

furry little butler.

Later you can add the word “Sit” if you like, but most dogs keep offering it forever because it always works.

4. Settle on a Mat – your calm button

Imagine being able to take your dog to a café, a friend’s house, or the vet and have them lie quietly on a little mat instead of pacing and panting. Bliss.

How to play

Choose a towel, blanket, or cheap mat that smells like home.

1. Toss a few treats onto the mat and let your dog Hoover them up while you quietly say “Settle”.
2. Repeat ten times.
3. Now say “Settle” first, then scatter the treats onto the mat.
4. Gradually wait longer before scattering, then reward only when they lie down.
5. Start moving around, dropping things, having someone knock on the door; calm on the mat = treats keep appearing.

Within a week or two you’ll have a dog who trots to their

mat and melts into a relaxed down the moment you place it on the floor. Magic for fireworks night, dinner parties, or just peaceful evenings on the sofa.

5. Leave It & Drop It – impulse control and happy trading

These two little games prevent stolen socks, eaten chicken bones, and arguments over toys.

Leave It (for things they haven't got yet)

Hold a boring treat in a closed fist. Let them sniff and paw. The moment they back off or look at you, open your hand and give a much better treat from the other hand.

Add the words "Leave it".

Soon you can place treats on the floor, under your foot, or on their paw and they'll look at you proudly instead of snatching.

Drop It (for things already in their mouth)

Offer a toy, let them grab it, then present something even more exciting (a squeaky ball, a piece of chicken). The instant they drop the first toy, praise like mad and let them have the new treasure.

After a while the cue "Drop" becomes the signal that

something better is coming, so they release happily every time.

6. Lovely Loose-Lead Walking – the “Red-Light-Green-Light” game

No more arm-wrenching walks!

How to play

Every time the lead goes tight, stop and stand still like a tree (no talking, no pulling).

The moment there is slack (or your dog looks back at you), cheerful voice, “Yes!”, treat at your knee, and walk forward again.

Add a cue like “With me” or “Close” and reward heavily for choosing to stay close.

Five-minute bursts several times a day turn most pullers into dreamy walking companions within a couple of weeks.

7. Wait at Doors, Gates, and the Car

Prevents door-dashing and teaches beautiful patience.

How to play

Approach any threshold. If your dog stays behind you or

behind an imaginary line, the door opens and freedom happens.

If they try to push past, calmly close the door or step back. Ten repetitions and most dogs start waiting politely, ears pricked, looking at you as if to say “I’ve got this, right?”

8. Come When Called – the game that can save their life

Never chase your dog again.

How to play (the happiest game in the world)

Two people, one dog, pockets stuffed with chicken or cheese.

Person A calls “Rover, COME!” in the most exciting voice imaginable. When the dog arrives, ten seconds of pure celebration: praise, treats, cuddles, maybe a quick game of tug.

Then Person B calls. Five turns and your dog thinks their name + “come” = the best party on earth.

Practise on long lines in bigger spaces, always keeping the reward huge reward. Before long you’ll have a dog who leaves rabbits, other dogs, even picnics to rocket back to you.

A little promise from me

Spend just a couple of minutes, several times a day, sprinkling these tiny games into normal life and within two or three weeks you'll look around and realise you've got a dog who:

- spins to their name with shining eyes
- sits beautifully for everything nice
- walks on a loose lead like a dream
- waits at doors without being asked
- leaves dropped food alone
- drops toys happily
- settles calmly on a mat
- and comes racing back when called

...all taught with laughter, treats, and love.

That's the quiet superpower of learning through play.

Ready for the toy box to burst wide open?

Part 3 is my collection of games: brain teasers, scent adventures, agility courses you can build from sofa cushions, and everything in between. We'll never run out of ways to keep our dogs grinning from ear to ear.

Part 3 | The Fun Games

Your never-ending treasure chest of fun

These are the games your dog will dream about when they're snoozing on the sofa.

Pick one, pick five, change them every day – your dog will never be bored again.

1. **Tug-of-War with Rules** Grab a sturdy rope or fleece tug toy. Start the game with a cheerful “Get it!” and tug gently together. After five or six seconds go completely still and quiet, then say “Drop” in a calm, happy voice. The instant the toy leaves their mouth, say “Yes!” and immediately tug again – the game comes back to life! Once they're dropping reliably, ask for a quick sit before the next round. Always let them win plenty of times – a dog who knows they can win stays keen forever.
2. **Two-Toy Fetch** Find two identical squeaky toys your dog adores. Throw the first one. As they race back, wave the second toy and call them in your most excited voice. The moment they drop the first toy at your feet, throw the second one and cheer

like mad. Pick up the dropped toy while they're running and repeat. Within minutes they're spitting the toy out at your feet, eyes shining for the next throw.

3. **Find It!** Let your dog see you place a treat two metres away, say "Find it!" and release them. Celebrate like they've discovered buried treasure. Next hide it behind a chair leg while they watch. Then hide three around the room. Then hide when they're not looking. Then hide toys instead of treats. Then take the game outdoors on a long line. The nose never stops learning and the tail never stops wagging.
4. **Muffin-Tin Magic** Take an old muffin tin, pop a treat in each hole, and cover with tennis balls or yoghurt-pot lids. Place it on the floor and step back. The pawing, nudging, and triumphant ball-removal is pure comedy gold and brilliant brain work. When they've mastered it, cover only some holes or hide the tin behind the sofa for extra challenge.
5. **Towel Burrito** Lay an old bath towel flat. Scatter kibble or treats along one long edge, roll it up

loosely like a swiss roll, fold the ends in, and hand it over. Twenty minutes of peaceful unrolling, sniffing, and nibbling while you finally drink a hot cup of tea.

6. **Which Hand?** Let your dog see you put a treat in one closed fist. Hold both fists out at their nose level. They sniff, paw, or nudge – the moment they choose correctly, open that hand with a delighted “Yes!” and let them have the prize. After a few rounds, wait for eye contact before opening. Suddenly you have a dog staring lovingly into your eyes instead of at your pockets.
7. **Flirt Pole Fun** Tie a soft toy to a piece of string and a stick (or buy a ready-made flirt pole). Drag it along the ground like a cheeky rabbit. Let your dog chase, leap, and catch, then cue “Drop” and bring it back to life. Add sudden stops, direction changes, and a quick sit before the next chase. Ten minutes of this equals an hour of ordinary running.
8. **Sofa-Cushion Agility** Arrange cushions to jump over, a broom balanced on two mugs, a cardboard box tunnel, and a blanket for a “pause” spot. Guide

your dog through with a happy voice and treats at first, then let them race the course for a jackpot of chicken at the end. Your living room becomes Crufts in minutes.

9. **The Shell Game** Three identical yoghurt pots or cups. Let your dog watch you hide a smelly treat under one, then shuffle them slowly across the floor. Ask “Where is it?” When they nose or paw the right one, lift it with a huge celebration. Gradually shuffle faster and move the cups while they hold a wait.
10. **Name Your Toys** Choose one favourite toy. Play wildly together, then pause, hold it up, and say its name brightly – “Ball!” The moment they look at it or touch it, throw it again and cheer. Repeat until the word “Ball!” alone makes them search. Add a second toy with a completely different name – “Rope!” Most dogs quickly learn ten, twenty, even fifty names and think it’s the best game ever invented.
11. **Snuffle Mat Heaven** Hide your dog’s entire dinner in a snuffle mat (or scatter it in long grass outside). Twenty peaceful minutes of sniffing and

foraging – the calmest, happiest way to eat.

12. **Cardboard Box Destruction** Party Stuff a few empty boxes with crumpled newspaper and hidden treats, tape loosely, and hand the parcel over. The ripping, tossing, and triumphant treat-finding is safe, glorious therapy for dogs who love to shred.
13. **Bubble Chase** Buy dog-safe peanut-butter or bacon-scented bubbles. Blow a gentle stream and watch your dog leap, snap, and sneeze with delight. Ten minutes leaves even teenagers floppy and happy.
14. **Digging Pit** Choose a corner of the garden or fill a child's sandpit with soft earth. Bury toys and treats at different depths. Lead your dog there the first few times with great excitement, then let them discover it themselves. Suddenly your flowerbeds are safe forever.
15. **Puppy Push-Ups** Lure your dog from sit to down to sit to stand and back again, marking each change with "Yes!" and a treat. Add the words in a silly song voice. They end up giggling and beautifully tired.
16. **Balance Cookie on Nose** Ask for a sit, gently

place a treat on their nose, count slowly to three (build up over days), then release with “OK!” The proud face when they hold it perfectly is priceless.

17. **Scent Trails** Drag a piece of cheese or sausage across the grass in a wiggly line ending in a jackpot pile. Let your dog follow with “Find it!” Make the trail longer and more hidden each day.
18. **Hallway Recall Race** Two people stand at opposite ends of the hallway. Take turns calling your dog with wild excitement and a pocket full of chicken. Your dog rockets back and forth like a furry shuttlecock, laughing the whole time.
19. **Cupboard Game** Hide behind a slightly open cupboard door and call your dog softly. When they nose the door open, explode out with praise and treats. Soon they check every cupboard with delighted anticipation.
20. **Touch the Spoon** Hold out a wooden spoon. When they touch it with their nose, “Yes!” and treat. Move the spoon higher, lower, behind your back – brilliant focus builder.
21. **Middle** Pat your legs and say “Middle”. When they come and sit between your feet, rain treats

from above. Perfect for calm greetings and safe road crossing.

22. **Find the Hidden Human** Ask a friend to hide in another room and call your dog. When they find them, huge party. Then you hide. The best recall practice ever invented.
23. **Puppy Parkour** Encourage safe climbing onto logs, low walls, or sturdy boxes. Mark every confident step with “Yes!” and a treat. Builds body awareness and bravery.
24. **Magic Box** Place a cardboard box on its side. Toss treats inside. Then hide treats deeper, then close the flaps almost shut. Ten minutes of happy problem-solving every time.

Part 4 | When Issues Appear

Gentle, loving solutions that really work

These pages are for the days when things feel a bit wobbly. Read them, with a cup of tea in hand, and remember: every single “problem” is just your dog telling

you they need a little more play, a little more understanding, or a little more structure.

All these fixes use the games you already know from Parts 2 and 3 – no new equipment, no harsh words, just gentle tweaks that feel like love.

Puppy biting – those tiny crocodile moments

Most puppies go through a land-shark phase, especially in the evenings when they're tired and teething. First, make sure they've had plenty of exercise and brain games during the day. A tired puppy is a good puppy.

When the needle-teeth come out, calmly say "Ouch!" (even if it doesn't really hurt) and immediately offer an acceptable chew – a frozen stuffed Kong, a Towel Burrito, or a cardboard box filled with paper.

Then redirect straight into Tug-of-War with Rules so they learn that biting skin ends the fun, but biting the toy makes the game come back to life.

Finish the evening with a long-lasting chew or Snuffle Mat so they fall asleep nibbling something allowed instead of your hands.

Most puppies grow out of this in days to weeks when life is rich enough and the rules are clear and kind.

Pulling on the lead – being dragged like a train behind your dog

If every walk feels like an arm workout you didn't sign up for, go back to basics.

Before you even leave the house, burn some energy with Two-Toy Fetch in the garden.

Then play Red-Light-Green-Light for the first five minutes of every walk: the lead tightens, you become a tree; the lead goes slack, you cheer and walk forward with a treat at your knee.

Scatter a few handfuls of kibble in long grass on the walk for sniffing breaks – sniffing is nature's off-switch.

Within ten days most pullers choose to walk beautifully beside you because it's the fastest way to keep moving and keep the good things coming.

Doorbell madness – the postman is not public enemy number one

Teach your dog that the doorbell predicts chicken, not chaos.

Put your dog on a lead or send them to their Settle mat in the hallway.

Have a helper ring the bell while you scatter a jackpot of treats on the mat or rain them from the sky.

Gradually move the mat closer to the door and let the dog stay calmer for longer before the reward arrives.

After a week or two, the sound of the bell makes your dog race to their mat and sit politely, tail wagging, because the postman has become the bringer of roast chicken.

Jumping up on people

Jumping is just an over-enthusiastic greeting.

Teach an alternative that's even more rewarding.

The moment guests arrive, ask your dog for a Sit or send them to their Settle mat and scatter treats there.

If four paws stay on the floor, attention and fuss rain down. If they jump, everyone turns away and becomes boring trees until four paws are back on the ground.

Play the Middle game so they learn coming to sit between your feet gets the cuddles they crave.

Most dogs switch to polite greetings in under a week.

Stealing socks, tea towels, or anything that isn't nailed down

Prevention is easier than cure. Give your dog their own “treasure box” filled with Cardboard Box Destruction Party parcels and Magic Boxes.

When they pick up something forbidden, calmly trade with something ten times better while saying “Thank you!” and “Take this instead”.

Play Two-Toy Fetch or Name Your Toys so grabbing the right thing is the most fun game in the house.

Suddenly socks lose their appeal when there are far more exciting legal options.

Counter-surfing and bin-raiding

Make the kitchen boring and the floor exciting.

Teach a rock-solid Settle on a Mat in the kitchen doorway – scatter treats there every time you cook.

Use baby gates or a house-line so they can't practise the crime when you're not looking.

Leave empty bins and boring plates on the counter while you reward calm behaviour on the floor.

Fill a snuffle mat with their dinner right under the counter so sniffing at floor level becomes the jackpot.

Recall that disappears at the park

Recall is a lifelong game, not a one-off lesson.

Go back to the Hallway Recall Race and Find the Hidden Human indoors with roast chicken.

Practise on a long line in quiet places with the same huge party every time they come.

Play Which Hand? and Touch the Spoon to build focus on you even when distractions appear.

Never call them when you know they won't come – go and get them happily instead.

Keep the reward higher than the distraction (a squeaky ball or a whole handful of sausage usually wins against rabbits).

Digging up the flowerbeds

Give them a better job. Build a Digging Pit in a quiet corner and bury treasure there every day.

Lead them to it the first few times with great excitement – “Dig here!”

Supervise garden time and redirect any rogue holes straight to the legal pit with praise and buried toys.

Most gardeners suddenly have the tidiest flowerbeds in the street.

Over-excitement with visitors

Teach calm greetings from day one. Visitors ignore your dog until four paws are on the floor or they're lying on their mat.

Scatter treats on the Settle mat the moment the doorbell rings.

Play the Middle game so sitting between your legs gets all the fuss.

Short, calm visits at first, gradually lengthening as your dog learns that quiet dogs get attention and bouncy ones get politely ignored.

Mild separation anxiety – whining when you leave the room

The trick is to build confidence slowly. Start with tiny absences – step outside the room for five seconds and return with a cheerful voice and a treat.

Leave a stuffed Kong or Towel Burrito so alone time predicts something delicious.

Play the Cupboard Game and Find It! so the house is full of happy surprises when you're not there.

Gradually increase the time you're gone, always returning before they get worried.

Most dogs learn that "Mum/Dad always comes back, and

something lovely happens when they do”.

Whatever cloud appears, the answer is almost always the same: more play, more sniffing, more clear and kind communication, and a little patience.

You’ve already got everything you need in the games on the previous pages.

Your dog isn’t giving you a hard time – they’re having a hard time.

Help them out with love and laughter, and the sun comes out again every single time.

Part 5 | A Lifetime of Happy Play

Because the fun never has to stop

By now your dog looks at you with shining eyes the moment you reach for the treat pouch, because they know something wonderful is coming.

This part is about keeping that sparkle alive for the next ten, fifteen, twenty years, through puppyhood, the teenage terrors, the calm middle years, and the gentle

golden season.

Tricks just for giggles

Never underestimate the power of a silly trick to brighten a rainy Tuesday.

Here are eight that need almost no equipment and make everyone smile:

Spin

Hold a treat at nose level, draw a slow circle above their head, say “Spin!”. Mark the moment they turn with “Yes!” and reward. Fade the hand circle until the word alone sends them twirling like a ballerina.

Play Dead (Bang!)

From a down, lure them onto their side with a treat, say “Bang!” in your best cowboy voice. Reward the flop. Add a finger-gun for extra drama.

Crawl

From a down, hold a treat just in front of their nose and move it slowly forward so they have to inch along the floor to follow it. Mark and reward every shuffle.

Fetch My Slippers

Put your slippers in plain sight, send your dog with

“Bring slippers!” Reward wildly when they pick one up. Add the second slipper, then hide them around the house.

Ring the Bell to Go Out

Hang a little bell by the back door. Every time you’re about to let them out, help them boop the bell with their nose or paw, then open the door. Within days they ring it themselves when nature calls.

Paw / Wave / High-Five

Start with a treat in your closed fist. When they paw at it, open your hand and say “Paw”. Raise your hand higher for Wave, palm out for High-Five.

Take a Bow

From standing, lure their nose down between their front legs with a treat so their bum stays up. Mark the stretch with “Yes!” and “Bow!” Perfect for after-play stretches too.

Leg Weaves

Walk forward while luring your dog in a figure-of-eight through your legs. Reward every weave. Speed up until they’re dancing through your legs like a circus star.

Weekly Adventure Calendar

Stick a simple chart on the fridge and tick off one special thing every day:

- Monday – Sniffari (30-minute loose-lead sniff walk)
- Tuesday – New trick day
- Wednesday – Digging Pit treasure hunt
- Thursday – Flirt pole sprint session
- Friday – Visit a dog-friendly café and practise Settle on a Mat
- Saturday – Parkour in the woods
- Sunday – Lazy morning Towel Burrito in bed with you

Rotate the activities so life never gets stale.

Five-minute boredom busters you can play in your pyjamas

- Scatter breakfast across the living-room rug
- Hide five treats around one room and release with “Find it!”
- Puppy Push-Ups while the kettle boils
- Which Hand? while you’re on a work call

- A quick game of Touch the Spoon between your feet for instant calm

Turning every walk into a sniffari

Once a week, clip on the lead, put your phone on silent, and let your dog choose the route by sniffing. No hurry, no “heel”, just gentle strolling and as many sniff-stops as they like.

Twenty minutes of sniffing is worth an hour of heel-walking for calming the teenage brain.

Rainy-day indoor Olympics

Build an obstacle course from sofa cushions, broom handles, and cardboard boxes.

Time them with your phone, cheer like mad, and give a jackpot for the fastest (or silliest) round.

When you’d love a little extra help

Sometimes we all need another pair of kind hands. If you need help with your dog you can contact me via my website <https://canine-behaviour-specialist.com>

The secret to a lifetime of harmony with your dog is quite simple: Never stop playing.

Every day, even if it's only five minutes, do something that makes your dog's eyes light up and their tail wag. That light is the glue that holds everything together, manners, calm, recall, love, together for the whole of their beautiful life.

You've got this.

And your dog already knows you're the best thing that ever happened to them.

Part 6 | Dogs with Extra Needs

Because every dog deserves a lifetime of play!

Some of the happiest, most loving dogs I've ever known have been deaf, blind, missing a leg, anxious, or grey around the muzzle.

Their bodies or minds might work differently, but their hearts are exactly the same: they light up when we play, they learn just as fast (often faster), and they teach us more than we ever teach them.

Here's how to take every single game in this book and

make it perfect for your extraordinary dog.

Deaf dogs – the quiet superstars

Everything is the same, only silent and brighter.

- Use a thumbs-up hand signal instead of “Yes!”
 - Flicker a torch or stomp on the floor for attention
 - Wave both arms like a mad windmill for recall
 - Vibration collars (the gentle kind, never shock) can be a lifesaver off-lead
- Favourite games: Two-Toy Fetch (visual chase), Find It! with big hand signals, Touch the Spoon, Leg Weaves.

Blind dogs – masters of scent and trust

They map the world with their nose and your calm, gentle voice.

- Use a different scent on each toy so Name Your Toys becomes instant
- Speak constantly in a calm, happy voice so they always know where you are
- Texture mats for Settle (fleece, rubber, carpet square)
- Scent Trails are pure magic – drag a piece of

sausage and let them follow the yellow brick road

- Clickers become a short, sharp tongue-click or the word “Good!”

Dogs with three legs or mobility challenges

Short bursts, big rewards, soft surfaces.

- Sofa-Cushion Agility becomes one low jump or a simple tunnel
- Flirt Pole while lying on the floor – they chase from a down
- Swimming is gold – water supports the body and tires them beautifully
- Balance Cookie on Nose, Puppy Push-Ups, and Which Hand? are perfect seated games

Anxious, fearful, or reactive dogs

Confidence grows one tiny happy moment at a time.

- Start every game below their worry threshold
- Settle on a Mat becomes their safe island in every room

- Find It! scattered behind furniture builds bravery
- Touch the Spoon or Hand-Touch brings them gently into your space
- Never force greetings – let them watch the world from their mat while chicken rains down

Senior dogs – gentle brains, wise hearts

Arthritis might slow the body, but the mind still wants to sparkle.

- Snuffle Mat dinners so eating is a game again
- Which Hand? and The Shell Game from the comfort of their bed
- Short scent trails ending in a warm lap
- Puppy Push-Ups become gentle “sit–down–sit” with big treats
- Lots of “Settle” cuddles while you stroke their grey muzzle

Every dog in the world can play.

We just change the volume, the distance, the surface, or the reward until it fits them perfectly.

The wag might be smaller, the spin might be slower, but the joy is exactly the same size.

You already know how to do this – you just listen, watch, and love them exactly as they are.

And they love you back twice as hard for it.

Final note

Keep playing.

Keep laughing.

Keep listening with your heart and your eyes.

The day you stop playing together is the day the magic fades, so play every single day,

because a dog who is loved through play
is a dog who is happy for life.

With love,

Rob Wright. Canine Behaviour Specialist.

If you need help with your dog or anything in this guide, you can contact me via my website:

<https://dog-aggression-specialist.com>

Progress Tracking Sheet

A simple weekly log keeps training fun, prevents frustration, and shows you exactly how far you've come.

Date

Activity/Game

Cues Practised

Mood (Happy/Calm/Frustrated/Excited)

Compliance ✓ ✗

Notes/Progress

Quick-Check Behaviour Snapshot

(tick if seen this week)

- ☐ Excessive anxiety or stress signals
- ☐ Difficulty focusing for more than a few seconds
- ☐ Poor recall (ignores cue more than twice)
- ☐ Resource guarding (growling over toys/food)
- ☐ Fear or reactivity around people/dogs
- ☐ Over-the-top excitement (can't calm down after play)

Review the sheet every Sunday evening with a cuppa. You'll spot patterns, see improvements, and know exactly when to raise the difficulty or take a step back.