

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING ACTIVITIES

When your dog reacts repeatedly, the first casualty is often the relationship you share. You become stressed and frustrated. You can't do things that you want and you're grieving for what could have been. This can damage your bond with your dog.

So it is important that you spend time building a strong relationship, doing activities that are enjoyable for both of you.

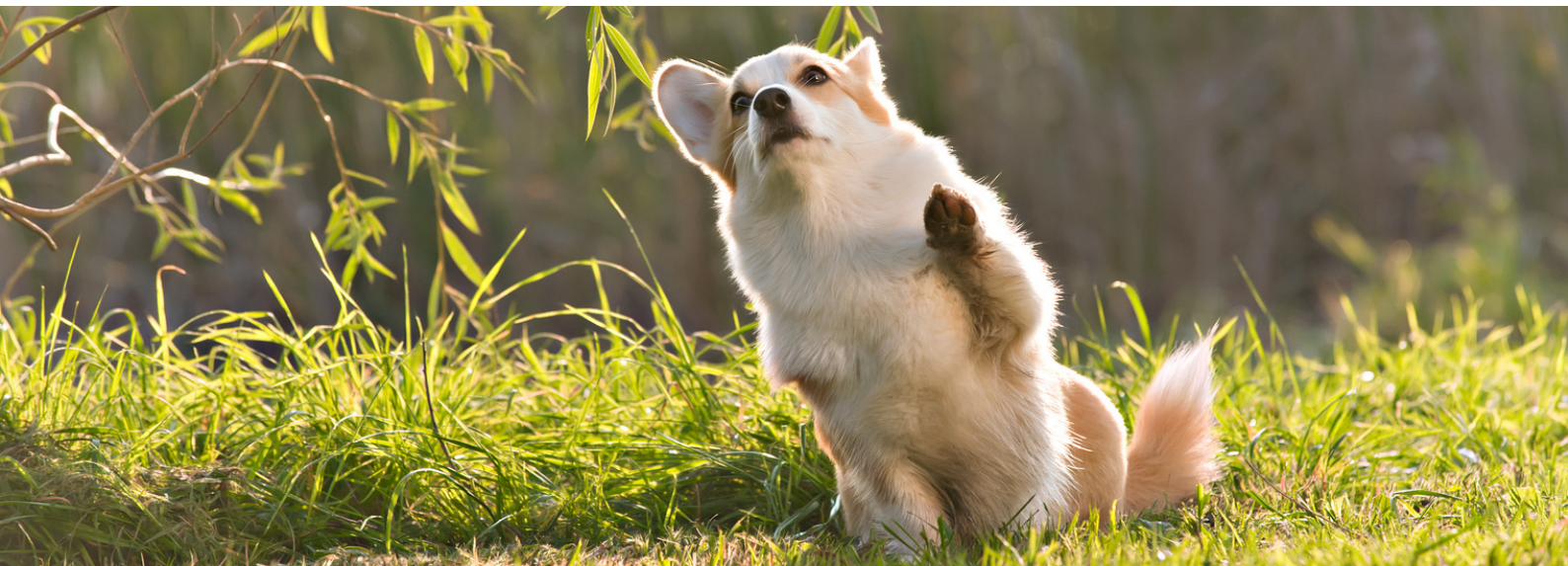
You can do scentwork with your dog, searching for food, a toy, specific scent, or even people.

Canine parkour is another great activity. Teach your dog to interact with their environment in novel ways. They can put their paws on an object, jump on it, move around it, go over or under it and much more!

Trick training is also fun. This includes simple tricks like giving a paw or doing a spin and more complex ones like taking a bow or tidying up toys.

These are all things that you can teach your dog easily that will help build your bond. You can even do them together on walks to make things more interesting and improve focus.

When you watch your dog find something using their nose, perform a Parkour move or do an impressive trick, you will see them differently. Celebrate the amazing being that they are!



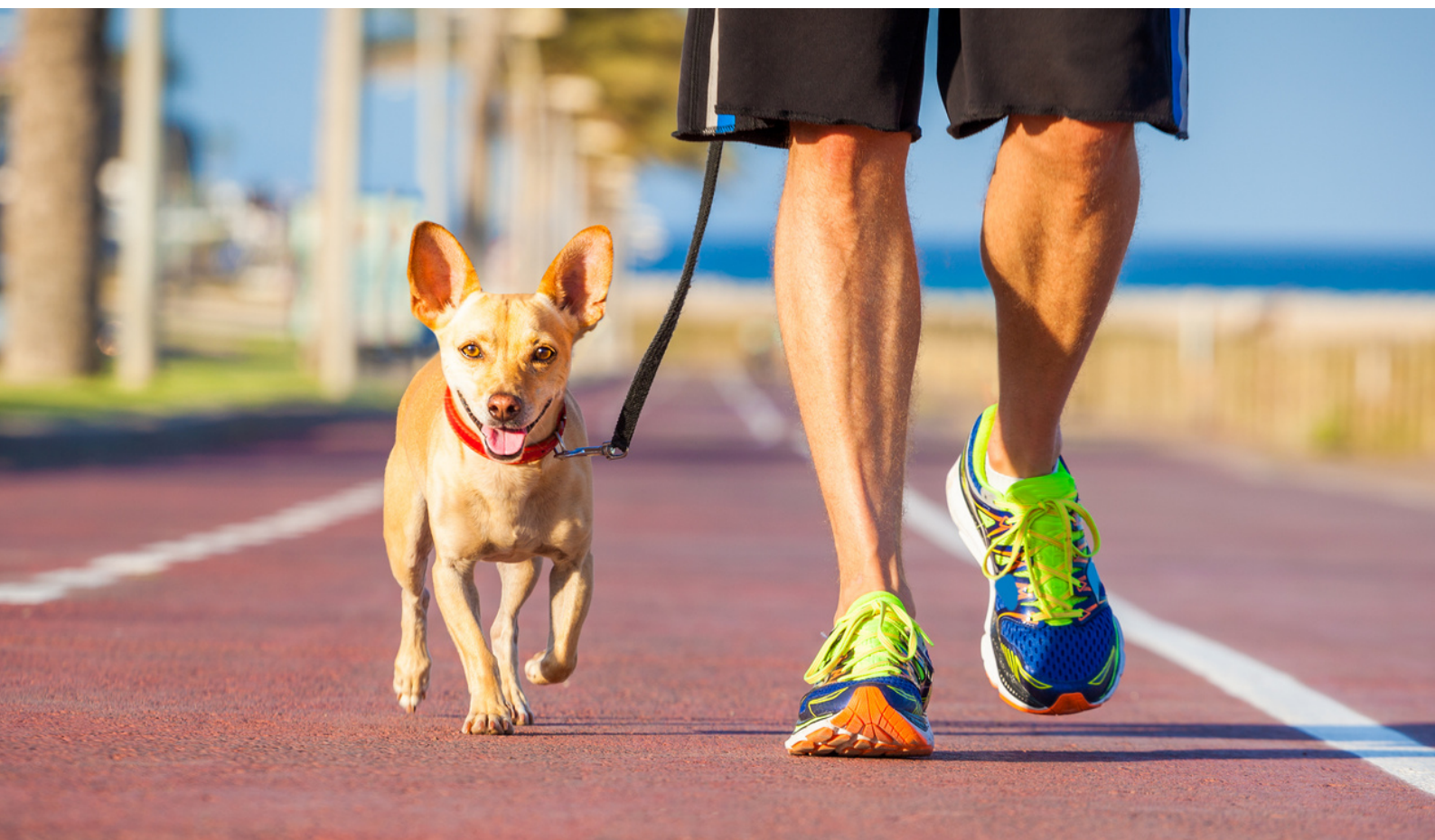
EXERCISE, ENRICHMENT AND PLAY

For your dog to really thrive, they need to have the opportunity for appropriate exercise, enrichment and play. What that looks like will depend on their age, fitness level and breed and on what you both enjoy.

Exercise can include free running but there are many other ways to keep your dog physically fit, such as chewing, parkour, swimming and canine conditioning. Enrichment activities, such as ACE Free Work, scent games and problem solving toys are excellent for your dog's mental wellbeing and can help keep them calm.

Play can be enjoyable alone, with a doggy friend or with you. No play is wrong but remember that some types of play, such as tug or fetch, can be very exciting for your dog. If you play active games like these, keep sessions short and include breaks, so that play remains fun without becoming too exciting.

Variety is good so what you do can look different each day. But give your dog regular opportunities for exercise, enrichment and play.



STOPPING WHEN YOUR DOG STOPS

Stopping when your dog stops can be an easy first step in helping you both stay safe, feel safe and prevent over reactivity.

When your dog stops moving, stop with them. This gives you time to observe and process what's happening.

If they stop and sniff, support them by waiting. A good sniff can help lower your dog's pulse rate and allowing your dog to use their nose is important for their wellbeing.

If they stop and watch the environment, watch with them. This can be a great bonding experience.

If they stop and look at you, this may indicate they need help. Think about what they might be trying to tell you and support them, perhaps by ending whatever is happening.

If there is a trigger present and your dog stops, let them watch for a few seconds and see if they naturally disengage. If not you can prompt them to move on. Watch out for your dog staring intently or becoming fixated. If this happens you'll want to interrupt immediately and gain distance.

Responding appropriately when your dog chooses to stop allows them to process what is happening and practice making good choices while still enabling you to step in and support when needed.



REINFORCERS - WHAT YOUR DOG LIKES

A reinforcer is anything that makes your dog's behaviour more likely to occur in the future. It can be anything that happens after your dog does a behaviour that results in them repeating the behaviour, often quicker and with more enthusiasm. There are many things that might be reinforcing to your dog including: eating tasty foods, playing with toys or sniffing out interesting scents.

Some things are naturally reinforcing for dogs in particular contexts - they do not need to learn that these are beneficial. For example, food is reinforcing when they are hungry, water when they are thirsty, and sleep when they are tired.

Animals find it reinforcing to feel they can make choices and control what happens to them and this is something to bear in mind when thinking about reinforcement for your dog. How can you ensure your dog is able to safely make choices that matter to them throughout the day?

There are also reinforcers that your dog might learn are enjoyable or beneficial - they are not born knowing it. This includes playing with toys, doing enrichment activities, training and other things like praise and touch, if your dog enjoys them.

What is reinforcing is always up to your dog! One dog may love playing with a ball, but another may show no interest. Playing with a ball might be a good reinforcer for the first dog but would be ineffective for the second.

So notice what your dog really likes. Do they enjoy sniffing, eating particular foods, touch or playing with a specific toy? If so, these things might be good options for reinforcing your dog's behaviour.



WORDS MATTER

The way you think and talk about your dog matters because it tells your brain how to interpret things. If you think your dog will never change, they probably never will. If you continually call your dog difficult or naughty or stubborn or a nutter, that is how you will start to see them. And this will subconsciously influence how you behave towards them.

You will start to make assumptions based on these beliefs and descriptors rather than look more closely at the situation.

So you think of your dog as stubborn and he stops suddenly in the street. You get frustrated because this is proving that he is stubborn. But he might be uncomfortable in his walking equipment, dislike the walking surface, in pain or have a negative association with the place. Or he may simply be aware of something that you are not and be taking in information. Without the label of "stubborn" you are more likely to notice these things.

And if you describe your dog in a certain way it will also influence how other people see them. So think about how you talk and think about your dog. What positive ways can you describe them? Are they playful, affectionate, improving for instance?

And how can you let people know to give your dog space without painting a negative picture of your dog?

Words matter so make yours count!



THE COUNTING GAME

The Counting Game is a simple way to help your dog move away from distractions and re-engage with you. Teaching it within ACE Free Work means that they have unrestricted access to food and are therefore interacting with you because they want to engage and not just to get treats.

When your dog is exploring the Free Work, place a treat on the ground and say “one” in a clear, calm voice. Your dog may come and investigate the treat. If this happens take a couple of steps away before saying “one” again and placing another treat on the floor.

If your dog doesn't come right away, place another treat on the same spot and say “two”. Wait a few moments to see if they respond. If not, place a third treat and say “three”.

If your dog does not respond after three repetitions, quietly pick up the treat pile and move on. Your dog is not yet ready to engage. You can try again in a few minutes. Choose a moment when your dog naturally disengages from the environment.

Sometimes your dog may not respond if they are feeling anxious. Make it easier for them to engage by placing the treat and then taking a step away. If they are very focused on the environment, use a more exaggerated movement as you place the treat so that you catch their attention visually in addition to counting.

The Counting Game lets you see when your dog is ready to engage and gives you a simple way to invite interaction. When your dog knows the game you can use it anywhere to get your dog's focus back on you. The more you play, the faster their response will become!



NOSE TARGETING TO HAND

Teaching your dog to target your hand with their nose can be a fun and easy behavior to learn together. This can be useful in a stressful situation when you need to re-direct their attention or help move them along.

Begin by teaching your dog in the home where they feel safe, with minimal distractions.

To start, present a flat hand a few inches away from your dog's nose and wait for them to investigate.

Mark and reward any interest or interaction with your hand.

If your dog struggles initially, you can always rub a treat on your hand to get their interest.

Next present your hand and wait for them to make contact with their nose before marking and rewarding.



Repeat until your dog is eagerly touching your hand with their nose as soon as you present it.

Next increase the distance away you hold your hand, so that your dog has to move in order to make contact.

Practice in all directions and with both hands. You can add a cue such as 'touch' by saying just before you present your hand.

You can progress to having your dog follow a moving target. To do this, as your dog moves towards your hand, slowly move it so your dog follows. Mark and reward after a short distance.

When your dog has mastered the art of nose targeting, you will be able to use it in so many ways including moving your dog to a mat when visitors arrive, turning your dog's head in the opposite direction to a trigger, or as a fun way to cue greetings with people. It will also come in handy as a great alternative for recall!

How many uses can you think of?



MIDDLE

Middle is a great game that makes you a safe and fun place to be. It's a simple trick where your dog moves around behind you before standing or sitting between your legs. This can help your dog to focus on you in busy environments and can also become a safe space for them.

To get started, lure your dog behind you before passing the treat to your other hand so they move underneath you. Mark and reward between your knees.

Repeat several times, building up the duration that your dog stays in position by feeding treats one after another as long as they remain in place.

The next step is to remove the food from your hand and use only a hand signal to guide your dog into place.

Practice until your dog is promptly offering the behaviour. You can then attach a cue word such as 'middle', by saying it just before you give the visual hand signal.

After enough repetition your dog will understand the verbal cue.

When they can do this in your home or garden it's time to take it out on the road to different locations.

With practice your dog will run into position from a distance when cued, no matter where you are!



FUN TO FOCUS

Teaching your dog to focus on you is a vital skill, especially if they struggle with over reactivity. If you reward your dog generously for checking in with you, they will offer it more frequently which will make everything else so much easier.

Start off by getting some of your dog's favourite treats and wait for them to look at you. Try not to prompt them but instead patiently wait. When your dog glances at you, mark and reward them. Some dogs may struggle to make eye contact initially. For these dogs simply mark and reward any time they turn their head towards you.

Next, move away a short distance before waiting again. Mark and reward by your feet as soon as your dog looks to you. Repeat this game, increasing the speed and distance you move. Eventually you will be running away with your dog chasing you, eager to make eye contact.

Rewarding your dog on the ground will give you some extra time to get away before they catch up with you again!

The more fun you make it, the better and more enthusiastic your dog will become at focusing on you.

An alternative which is great in smaller spaces is to mark and reward eye contact before turning on the spot a quarter circle. Wait for your dog to move in front and look at you again. Mark and reward before turning again. Don't be afraid to mix it up and practice in both directions.

Focus games are great to practice when you have a spare few minutes throughout your day - perhaps when the kettle is boiling, or you're waiting on the phone.

Soon your dog will be checking in frequently wherever you are.



TEACHING A SETTLE

Relaxation and calm are the foundation for everything else you do. You want to help your dog to relax and calm at home and, later, out on walks. You are aiming to reduce their overall level of arousal so they can think more clearly.

There are lots of relaxing activities you can do with your dog. A good starting point is to teach your dog to rest on a mat, regardless of what is happening around them.

First build value in going to the mat. Choose a quiet location and a mat that is unknown to your dog. Make a big show of placing the mat on the floor in front of you. Your dog will probably come over to investigate.

As soon as they step on the mat, mark and then throw a treat a little away from the mat to reset. Wait for your dog to come back and repeat.

Ask for a little more each time. One paw on the mat, two paws, three paws, all paws. Your dog will soon learn that the mat is a great place to be.

Once your dog is consistently returning to the mat, wait to see if they will offer a sit or a down. If not, cue it until they automatically choose to sit or lie down on the mat.

You can then start to build duration by pausing before you mark and treat and then add distractions.

Start by stepping to one side and then back. If your dog stays in place, treat them. Then take two steps. Then try running on the spot. Then walking all the way around your dog. Eventually you can even build in leaving the room and coming back. Always work at your dog's pace. If they move, you are going too fast. Go back a step and do more practice.



IS THIS OK WITH YOU?

Consent is as important to your dog as it is to you. You can help your dog to feel safe by making sure they always have the opportunity to choose when and how they interact with you and with other people.

This can be as simple as pausing when you touch them to note their response. Start by using the back of your hand, especially if your dog is body sensitive. Stroke them once before taking your hand away. What do they do?

If they nudge you or lean closer, stroke them again. Continue with regular pauses as long as they are happy. If they lean or move away then give them space. They may not be in the mood to interact right now. You can also get other people to do the same when interacting with your dog.

Another way you can teach your dog to communicate consent using the Bucket Game. When they look at the bucket you can continue whatever you're doing - this can include brushing them, checking their ears or clipping their nails. If they look away from the bucket at any time, you must stop what you're doing.

When your dog realises it is easy to communicate with you and you always listen, you may find them wanting to opt in to things more frequently. Choice and control over what happens to them is hugely reinforcing!

