

Fun Things to Do with Your Dog

By Sherry Woodard

There are many activities that you can enjoy with your dog. Here are some examples:

Agility. In agility trials, human handlers guide dogs off lead through obstacle courses that consist of hurdles, teeter-totters, tunnels, balance beams, weave poles, climbing structures, etc. Agility trials can be very competitive, or they can be done just for fun. Dogs gain confidence, release energy and learn how to stay focused while in high spirits. There are various organizations in the United States that sanction agility trials. For more information, visit www.agilitytrial.com.



Animal-Assisted Activities (AAA). These activities usually take place in a hospital or nursing home, not in a rehabilitative setting. Teams doing this type of visit help to improve mood or promote socialization rather than work on specific patient goals. Facilities that use animals for these activities may or may not require that handlers and animals become certified.

Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT). AAT is more goal-directed than AAA; the results may be documented to meet a particular patient's specific goals. AAA and AAT are valuable tools that can be used to promote well-being while celebrating the joy inherent in the canine-human bond. There are several programs in the United States that certify both the handler and the animal for therapy work. For more information on both AAA and AAT, visit the website for the Delta Society (www.deltasociety.org), whose mission is to improve human health through service and therapy animals.

Backpacking. Dogs, like people, love to get away from it all! If you're going on a backpacking trip with your dog, plan ahead. Taking a dog out on the trail without some type of fitness conditioning can be dangerous to your dog's health. Fitness doesn't come overnight, so start the process well before your trip. Check with a local authority to see if pets are allowed in the area where you'll be trekking; some places allow dogs, but require permits. Carry a first-aid kit for you and your dog, and know how to administer basic first aid if your dog becomes injured. At any time of year, remember to pack enough water for you and your dog. For more information, visit this website: <http://traildog.hypermart.net/>.

Day Trips. Most dogs love to ride in the car. Take your dog along if you're visiting friends or family. For a special treat, include a side trip to do some shopping with your dog. Some dogs love to browse at pet supply stores (many of which allow you to bring your dog inside). Your dog may ask for a treat or two, so be prepared to spend a little money on this outing!

Dog Parks. Dog parks – places where dogs are allowed to roam free – are becoming more common in many cities. Most are securely fenced, have safety signs posted with park rules, and require that you clean up after your dog (take some bags in case they're not provided). Social dogs enjoy meeting new dog friends and returning to see them time and time again. You might make new friends as well! If your dog is toy-sized, supervise him or her closely around other dogs. While trying to play, a big dog may injure a small dog unintentionally. Some parks have a section exclusively for small dogs. For more information, visit www.dog-play.com/dogpark.html.

Freestyle Musical Dance. This choreographed set of moves, performed to music, is done by dogs in partnership with their handlers. If you have not seen this new “sport” in action, you will be amazed at the level of expertise that can be achieved through teamwork, focus, and practice, practice, practice. For more information, visit www.dog-play.com/musical.html.

Flyball. Flyball is a relay race that requires a dog to race over four hurdles, catch a tennis ball that has been released from a spring-loaded launcher, and then race back over the hurdles again. The dogs race in teams of four. Any dog who likes to chase a ball will probably love flyball, and it's an excellent way for your dog to burn up excess energy.

Frisbee. Dogs who love to play Frisbee, either purely for pleasure or in competition, are called disc dogs. Some dogs won't allow their people to play without them! If your dog loves to play ball, you may want to buy a disc and get your dog involved in this great form of exercise. One word of caution, however: This sport involves a lot of jumping, so consult with your veterinarian before starting your dog on a vigorous Frisbee training program. For more information about Frisbee competitions and training, visit www.discdog.com/FAQ.htm.

Hiking. Though most national parks don't allow dogs on trails, there are many state parks that do. For more information on finding dog-friendly trails in your state, visit <http://hikewithyourdog.com>. Also, almost every city has trails pretty close by that you can explore with your canine companion. Even city streets can be used for a hiking adventure – take a local map and mark off a path up and down streets, adding a hill or two for more strenuous exercise. Don't forget to pack a first-aid kit, poop bags, and plenty of water.

Obedience. All dogs should receive some obedience training. How far you take it is up to you – some people want their dogs to compete in serious obedience trials, while others just want a dog who will obey simple commands in daily life. In either case, both you and your dog will enjoy the benefits of better communication and the increased bond between you that results from time spent together teaching, learning, and practicing. For more information, call your local animal shelter and ask for a referral for a training class.

Tracking. Playing hide-and-seek with a toy or item of clothing can be a tracking challenge for your dog. In winter, a fun game is to place a glove (with a treat inside for extra enticement) just under the surface of the snow.

Trick Training. Using clicker training or lure training (using treats for motivation) to teach your dog to do tricks is a great way to spend time with your dog, improve your

relationship, and make obedience training even more fun. Once you and your dog have a repertoire of tricks, you can show off your wonder dog! Here are two websites on clicker training: www.clickertrain.com and www.clickertraining.com.

Vacations. If you haven't taken a vacation with your dog, give it some thought. It can be very rewarding to have your dog along on your adventure, and many hotel chains accept dogs these days. To find dog-friendly lodging, visit www.dogfriendly.com, a website that also lists dog-friendly restaurants, parks, beaches and other attractions. The website called www.petfriendlytravel.com includes vacation rentals, such as cabins, condos and B&Bs. If you want to take it a step further, look into dog camps, the ultimate vacation for you and your dog. They provide games, training opportunities, and plenty of other dogs to interact with. For a list of dog camps, visit www.dog-play.com/camps.html.

When thinking about involving your dog in any strenuous activity, consider his or her health and physical ability. If your dog has not been exercising regularly, schedule a visit to your veterinarian. If more than a checkup (blood work to look at organ health, x-rays for joint health, etc.) is needed, your vet will advise you. He may also encourage you to increase your dog's exercise level gradually.

Remember – your dog loves spending time with you, so get out there with your canine companion and have some fun!

Sherry Woodard is the dog training and care consultant at Best Friends. She develops resources and provides consulting services nationally to help achieve Best Friends' No More Homeless Pets mission.

See also: Dog Toys
Clicker Training for You and Your Pets