

Homeward Bound Golden Retriever Rescue

Golden Rule Dog Training

Nose Games for Dogs

Born to sniff

The amazing adventures a dog can have through their nose!

A dog's nose not only rules their face, but their brain as well. In fact, a dog relies on his sense of smell to decipher his world, just as people depend on their sight. Even though this contrasting view may be difficult to imagine, your dog interprets as much information as you do. However, she does this by using her nose to smell an object or animal, not by staring at it.

A dog's brain is also specialized for detecting various scents. The percentage of the dog's brain that is dedicated to examining scents is actually 40 times larger than that of a human! It's been estimated that dogs can identify smells somewhere between 1,000 to 10,000 times better than nasal-challenged humans can.

What Smells?

Dog's smell things that are in the air and on the ground. An air scent takes place when a disturbance is made by whatever (a human, another dog, a squirrel, etc.) has just passed through the air; such as temperature, humidity, wind speed and direction. Air scent disappears faster than ground scent.

Air scents:

- Your dog can detect the scent of any treats or toys that you are carrying in your pockets, hands, etc. As soon as you begin your walk, your dog will know exactly what you have hidden around your person for its reward for "good behavior".
- Another example of air scent is when dogs bark "for no apparent reason". The dog perceives the scent of another dog or human that is passing his area; even if the doors and windows are tightly closed or if they are a distance away!
- Dogs use scent a great deal when remembering a threatening or an exciting event; they store it in their long-term memory. An example is when your dog is going to a place he likes such as the park, the beach or Homeward Bound for training! The dog can identify the same environmental smell in the air as he did when he visited the location previously. This is why they get so excited when you turn a corner!

Ground scents:

- Scents are left on the ground by an animal or human disturbing the exterior as it walked across it; grass would be crushed, the ground is disturbed by a human or animal, leaves from a tree are moved or crushed, twigs are broken, etc.
- Other animals leave tiny fragments of skin, feather or fur (which includes pheromones) as they move across the ground and a dog can recognize the subtle differences between specific animals as it follows this trail of dust particles.

- We, as humans leave fragments of dead skin and hair behind as well as clothing, shoes, and manmade scents such as perfume or deodorant. Dogs are also able to detect the emotions of humans by the scent of the pheromones in the air or on the ground.

What are you trying to say?

- **Urine marking and feces marking:**
These strong scents are ways for a dog to leave a "message" on the environment for other animals.
- **Scratching the ground:**
Some dogs scratch the ground after relieving themselves (you may see grass and leaves flying everywhere). Scratching and disturbing the ground makes the "scent message" more noticeable and captivating for any other dogs that come along later.
- **Rubbing themselves against an object:**
Dogs typically rub themselves against trees, fences, humans, furniture, etc. to leave their scent on them.
- **Pheromones:**
These are outer chemical vehicles that allow dogs to detect various emotional states of not only dogs but humans as well. Pheromones help dogs to identify another dog's gender and sexual activity, levels of stress, fears or aggression; they can also detect calmness, relief, being relaxed, etc.

Dog to Dog what's the Story?

Upon meeting other dogs your dog:

- Determines, is it a friend? An enemy? Or prey? If the dog considers the other dog as a friend and part of its pack, it will over-mark the scent with its own so that both scents merge and become a new "identity" to any other dogs that come across the scent.
- Determines the dog's age; is it a puppy, juvenile or adult? Based on that, the dog determines his rank or status in his "pack" or the area he lives in.
- Decides the gender: male or female, neutered or spayed? Intact?
- Concludes the emotional state and levels of stress; is the dog fearful, anxious, overexcited, happy, contented or relaxed (this is established through pheromones).
- Makes a decision regarding the other dog's health, sexual stimulation and his diet!

That is a lot of information to gather in a 5 second butt sniff!

Many dogs are uneasy about coming too close to another dog, so they communicate by sniffing the other dog's scent "messages" and leaving their own "message" for the other dog to smell later on. Dogs can learn a lot about each other by sniffing each other's markings before actually meeting and displaying body language to each other.

Dogs also leave their scent to mark the boundaries of their territory. This warns other dogs to respect these boundaries and not to trespass. This is often backed up with barking if dogs come too close to their territory.

Dog to Human: What's the Story?

When a dog approaches a human, they are able to determine their pheromones caused by stress, excitement, anger, anxiety or apprehension. This is why dogs become fearful or aggressive when they are close to people that are nervous. The dog recognizes the scent of fear on the human and thinks that they are going to attack, so the dog may attack first in "self defense". This is also true for dogs that are fearful of other dogs - they become "victims" and are attacked by other dogs because they can detect the fearful dog's pheromones either on the ground or in the air and believe that it will attack them.

On the other hand, dogs can also be positively affected by the scent of pheromones given off by emotions such as calmness, happiness and contentment. If humans feel relaxed and calm, their scent triggers similar behaviors in their dogs as well.

Why Nose Games?

Now that you understand why a dog's nose is so important, why not start playing games your dog will enjoy that supports a primal need? Sniffing! You can have fun, exercise your dog's brain, and expend some of that dog-energy all at the same time! Playing games with your dog is really good for your relationship with him as well.

Keep in mind, while dogs are not human they are social animals and playing is an important part in developing shared relationships. Playing games is an essential part of your dog's life. You can teach a dog to obey by playing games that make following your instructions fun. Why make training your dog a chore, when it can be fun for both of you?

The scent games below are fitting for any breed at any age. All of these games are reliant on the dog's nose, not his eyesight; blind dogs, older dogs, and deaf dogs can all have fun with many of these games. The objective is to start with simple finds so your dog is successful from the beginning; don't try and move to fast and too far or your dog may become frustrated.

Let the Games Begin!

Let's start with an easy game:

Which One?

Step 1: With food or a toy in only one hand, present both closed hands to the dog. Ask your dog, "Which one?"

Step 2: You can raise the criteria by asking your dog to touch with his paw or scratch lightly at the correct hand before receiving his treat, or simply have his nose bump your hand (you can start with "touch" cue).

Step 3: If he is unsuccessful, show him the correct hand the treat is in, but don't give the treat! Try again. Add lots of praise!

Find the Treat Games

Supplies:

- 10 cardboard boxes of varied sizes for dog to search for treats.
- Strong-smelling treats (Yummy Chummies, Jerky, salmon treats, etc.)
- A room with space to move. If you have a very large area you may want to set up some barriers so the search area isn't too large. A dining area can be a good place to start since it doesn't usually have much furniture in it to serve as distractions.

Set-up:

- Move your dog to a room other than the one where you'll be setting up the game. If your dog has separation anxiety and wouldn't tolerate this well, try putting a baby gate across the door to keep him from interfering with your set up. You'll just have to be trickier when it's time to hide the treats.

- If you have multiple pets, you'll want to work one dog at a time. Find a secure place for your other pets while each dog is working.
- Lay the open boxes on the floor in any configuration.
- Put a few treats into one of the boxes.
- If your dog is watching you set up "fake hide" treats in several of the boxes by putting your hand into the boxes and moving it around as if you're hiding something there.
- Move your dog to a room other than the one where you'll be setting up the game. If your dog has separation anxiety and wouldn't tolerate this well, try putting a baby gate across the door to keep him from interfering with your set up. You'll just have to be trickier when it's time to hide the treats.

#1 – The Find It Game:

You really want your dog to be excited about this game. There is no sit-stay or any other obedience used, it's all about increasing the dog's drive to sniff and having fun!

Set up:

- Bring your dog to the search area.
- Give him a sample of the same treat you are hiding.
- Turn your dog loose to sniff out the treat.
- Stay quiet and still. Don't talk to him, just let him sniff. If he looks to you for help, show him your empty, open hands and he will move on.
- If your dog moves away from the search area or gets distracted by something else, try to get him back on track in the gentlest way possible. You may want to try moving your body farther into the search area. Or try tossing one of the treats he's search for into the search area. If you work too hard to move him toward the treats, he may stop sniffing and just look to you for clues.
- When he finds the treat, don't get too excited when he gets near. You want him to make the find himself.
- Repeat the set up and find about 3 or 4 times. You want to be sure to end the game while your dog is still having fun. You can allow turns for other dogs in your house or pick up and put away the boxes until the next time.

#2 - The Hide and Seek Game:

This is a great game, and you may want to play at night or in a dark house. You can hide in an open closet, shower or tub with the curtain drawn, standing behind an open door, hunkered down behind a bush, standing very still near a tree (dogs, like all predators, distinguish movement much better than stationary objects) or sitting on a picnic table, etc.

Step 1: You can put your dog in a "Sit-stay" or have someone hold the dog. They should be verbally exciting to the dog, asking, "Where did she go? Can you FIND her?" and release the dog with a "FIND IT" cue.

Step 2: Give the dog a chance to work it out, but if he passes you more than twice, give him a "clue" (clearing your throat or a short whistle). A good clue is a distinctive but brief sound, such as that does not allow the dog to find you by using his hearing, but helps him target the general area you are in for further investigation with his nose.

Step 3: When the dog finds you, give him lots of praise and a treat or two! Toy motivated dogs will enjoy a game of fetch or tugging as a reward.

Step 4: As the dog gets more skilled at this game, increase the difficulty of the game by throwing a blanket over yourself, not moving until the dog actually touches you, or even hiding in an area that the dog can smell you, see you (or part of you) but cannot get to you. ALWAYS praise the dog generously for his brilliance!

Variation: Find it with Lights Out:

This one is great fun for the dog. Show your dog a treat (preferably crunchy) or his favorite toy, and then place it out of his sight but easily accessible in a dark room. Say, "Find it" and follow him in to listen for his success which you praise excitedly. The rewards for the dog are multiple; the dog gets a treat or finds his toy and is praised! If using a toy, be sure to reward his find with some play before starting again.

When multiple treats or toys are used, this particular game helps to build persistence and trust in the handler. The dog may initially find only 2 out of 3 treats, but he quickly discovers that persistence in searching when you give the "Find it!" cue pays off. He learns to believe you, there really is another treat there!

You can increase the difficulty of this game by hiding the treats in less accessible places (like in a shoe, or placed on a low shelf.) This can be practiced outdoors as well as in your car, or a parking lot or anywhere else you can think of!

3. "Find It" on Walks:

Step 1: First, walk for about 10 minutes and let your dog potty if needed. Then ask your dog to "sit-stay." Show him a treat and set it on the ground a few feet away. Come back to your dog; give him a treat to reward him for holding his stay. Then, release him to find the treat. Easy! Not only can he smell it, he saw where you put it.

Step 2: Once he understands the game, make the game more difficult by hiding the treat under some leaves or behind a fencepost. Hide it above ground level, on a bench or the top of a rock. Try several spots and pretend to hide a treat in each one, but actually hide only one treat.

In most places your dog has to be on leash, so hide treats within his reach; unless you're someplace where it's safe and legal for your dog to be off leash. You can always tether him while hiding treats. Always keep your dog in sight, of course.

4. Hide Food-Dispensing Toys:

The first few times you play let your dog see you "hiding" the toys or food dispensers. Your dog might happen to sniff them out anyway, but it helps to clue him in that you're giving him a new game. Use the same number of toys every time; we think dogs have a basic sense of numbers, so that way he'll know how many he has to find.

As your dog gets better at the game, make the toys harder to find by placing them on different levels of your house and behind and under furniture.

Set-up:

- Move your dog to a room other than the one where you'll be setting up the game. If your dog has separation anxiety and wouldn't tolerate this well, try putting a baby gate across the door to keep him from interfering with your set up. You'll just have to be trickier when it's time to hide the treats.
- If you have multiple pets, you'll want to work one dog at a time. Find a secure place for your other pets while each dog is working.
- Lay the open boxes on the floor in any configuration.
- Arrange common household objects, such as laundry baskets, blankets, stepladders, chairs, etc. around the floor.
- If your dog is watching you set up from behind a baby gate, "fake hide" treats in several of the boxes by putting your hand into the boxes and moving it around as if you're hiding something there.

Step 1: Bring your dog to the entry way of the area where she'll search.

Step 2: Hold her gently by the collar before turning her loose to sniff the treat.

Step 3: Say, "find it" as your dog finds the treats and eats them. Let her find the toy/treats herself.

Step 4: For the next set up, hide the toy/treats in a household objects instead of a box. Repeat the find about 3 or 4 times. You want to be sure to end the game while your dog is still having fun.

5. “Where is it”?

This game allows your dog to feel useful, and this particular game helps boost a dog's confidence. As you are walking, carefully drop an object you have been carrying or held in your pocket.

Step 1: Continue walking for 10-15 steps, then stop as if mildly concerned, patting your pockets and looking around. Here's your chance to really put on a performance! Ask the dog, "Where is it? Can you help? Can you FIND IT?"

Step 2: Begin walking back towards the spot where you dropped the article, encouraging the dog to sniff the ground by pointing and telling him to FIND IT.

Step 3: As you get closer to the object, give the dog a little room so that he can find it all by himself. If he needs help, try a subtle kick of the object to bring it to his attention while you pretend not to notice. Once the dog identifies the object, make a huge fuss over his brilliance!

You can vary the type of objects, such as keys or an empty soda can, etc. However, metal objects do not hold scent as well as fabric or leather and may be harder for your dog to detect; you may want to use an old pair of gloves or a towel.

Step 4: Next, raise the criteria by using longer periods of time between the drop and the search, having the object thrown to the side or even off the path you are traveling, and multiple object drops. Especially fun are surprise set-ups where you plant an object along a path before taking the dog that way.

You point out the object to the dog with a question, say, "What's that?" and praise him for searching. You can also walk past it and then send him back with a “FIND IT” cue.

Lay a Scent Trail at Home

You can play this game in your yard or indoors. If you're indoors, you may want to choose a room with flooring other than carpet.

Set up: To lay the trail outside, drop tiny pieces of the treat every few inches along your route, with a big treat bonus at the end. Indoors, you can rub the treat along the floor to leave a trail.

Step 1: Without your dog present, lay a scent trail in a hiding place where you leave the treat. The first couple of times you play this game make the trail short so your dog can learn how the game works.

Step 2: Bring your dog into the area and show him where the trail starts.

As your dog gets better at this game, raise the criteria by making the trail longer; or add distance between the treats. If you're inside, rub the treat on the floor for an inch or two and then leave a clean area, then rub the floor again with the treat scent.

Advanced Games

“3-2-1- FIND IT!” *This game can be done with one person, but it is easier with two!*

Step one: Use a favorite toy and start playing with it to get your dog interested. Hold the dog (gently at the collar, his leash or harness) and throw the object into the grass. The dog may see it and "mark" the fall of the object, but as the difficulty of the game increases, this will only help him define the area he needs to search.

Step 2: Once the object has landed and stopped moving, count to 3 before releasing the dog to "FIND IT." You may gradually increase the time before releasing the dog (counting up to 10) and if you have an area that has thick grasses or natural cover, the game is more difficult for the dog.

Another version: Play this game in the dark. Using the same rules as above this game relies on the natural cover of darkness to encourage the dog to use his nose. Instead of marking the fall with his eyes, your dog may listen carefully.

This only helps the dog narrow the area he will have to search. This can be played inside (throwing the object into a dark closet, corner or room) or outside. When beginning this game don't throw the toy very far. The point of all these games is success, not frustration for the dog. Also, be sure YOU know where the heck it landed in case the dog needs some help.

Get Only One!

This is a more advanced scent game, but extremely useful to teach the dog only one object is wanted from a group of similar objects.

Step 1: Go plant some other objects around the area you will be playing in. Then go back to your dog.

Step 2: Start with a ball or his favorite toy and play with him for a few minutes (this will be the one toy you want out of the others). This allows your scent and his doggy-slobber to cover the ball/toy.

Step 3: Now move to an area where you have planted several similar objects.

Throw the one ball/toy into that area, using the "3-2-1-Find It" process above.

If the dog picks up an incorrect object, say nothing as you take it and put it down or in your pocket.

With an excited voice, say "FIND IT" again, leading the dog back to the general area if needed. When the dog picks the right ball/toy you reward this with praise a minute or two of happy play before repeating the game again.

This can be combined with the more difficult levels of 3-2-1-FIND IT for really advanced discrimination by the dog.

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