



SCENT GAMES-EDUCATING YOUR DOG'S NOSE

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Easy exercises & games to teach any dog scent discrimination as a fun & enjoyable game using his natural talents.

By John Rice & Suzanne Clothier

Long before you pull out the tracking flags, dust off the utility articles or decide that your dog needs to learn how to use his nose, he's been busy every day using his nose to explore his world. The dog's sense of smell is functional at birth. From the moment he takes his first breath, your dog lives in a world rich with scents. All you need to do is teach the dog specifically how you want him to use his astonishing olfactory powers.

The easiest way to accomplish this is through games. The Scent Work Games presented below are suitable for any breed at any age from 6 weeks on, but we recommend strongly that these games be a regular part of your puppy's development. All of these games stress reliance on his nose, not his eyesight.

To avoid confusing your dog, we recommend you choose one word which indicates food or dog toys (for example, "SEEK"), and a completely different word for objects with human scent or people themselves (for example, "FIND IT"). In this fashion, the dog is always clear about what he's looking for with his nose and will not confuse food scents with human scent. One of the most common problems with using food to teach scent discrimination or tracking is that you must ultimately teach the dog that the food is not what you really meant at all!

WHICH HAND?

This is the simplest of all games. With food or a toy in only one hand, present both closed hands to the dog. Ask him, "Which one?" You may improve upon this game by insisting he touch with a paw or scratch lightly at the correct hand before receiving his treat, or simply have his nose bump your hand. If he gets it wrong, show him the correct hand but DO NOT give the treat! Just try again. Add lots of dramatic flair to this - dogs love a good show.

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. Tell him to SEEK (or whatever word you've chosen for food/toys). Follow him in to listen for his success which you will praise enthusiastically. Obviously, the rewards for the dog are multiple - he gets a treat or finds his toy plus a very happy handler. 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 SEEK command pays off. He learns to believe you - there really is another one there!

You can increase the difficulty of LIGHTS OUT by hiding the cookies 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!

HIDE & SEEK

This is a doggy favorite best played at night or in a darkened house initially. Partially open closets are great (closed closets may not allow sufficient scent to escape), as are shower stalls/tubs with the curtain drawn, standing behind an open door, crouching 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 or laying across your car's trunk, or wherever!

To add to the dog's eagerness (or in the event that you are unable to sneak away or can't leave the dog), have someone hold the dog. They should be verbally exciting to the dog, asking, "Where did she go? What is she gets lost? Can you FIND her?" and release the dog with a FIND IT command.

Give the dog a chance to work it out, but if he passes you more than twice, give him a "clue" by making a noise AFTER he's passed you the third time. A good clue is a distinctive but brief sound, such as clearing your throat or a short whistle 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. However the dog finds you, tons of praise is to be heaped upon his head, and of course a treat or two never hurts. Toy motivated dogs will delight in a game of fetch or tugging as a reward.

As the dog gets more skilled at HIDE & SEEK, you can increase the difficulty of the game by throwing a blanket or tarp 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. This is useful for teaching a scratch or bark alert if desired (commonly used in drug work/search and rescue training). Always praise the dog generously for his brilliance.

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WHAT A KLUTZ

This game allows you to show the dog how important his nose is to you. Dogs like to feel useful, and this particular game helps boost a dog's confidence and self importance. As you are walking, discreetly drop an object you have been carrying or had in your pocket. 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 me? Can you FIND IT?"

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. 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 (after all, you are the klutz who dropped it - why not go ahead and trip over it too?) to bring it to his attention while you pretend not to notice. Once the dog indicates the article, make a huge fuss over this genius who has saved you from dropping an old glove!

Vary the type of article you use, and be sure to include metal objects such as car keys, a crumpled soda can, even a ring or bracelet you have worn. Obviously, be careful when you drop these and be sure you can find them again! Don't use valuable items - just facsimiles. Your dog's ability and willingness to work on metal objects will be helpful in the Utility ring, but more importantly, this skill could come in very handy some day should you lose your car keys. NOTE: Metal/hard objects do not hold scent as well as fabric or leather. This does not mean that your dog can't find them, just that his reaction may be different and he will probably have to work closer to the object before locating it.

The difficulty of WHAT A KLUTZ can be increased by: 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 may point out the object to the dog with a question of "What's that?" and praise him for investigating, or walk past it and then send him back with a FIND IT command. This is a great preparation for tracking dogs who must learn to indicate on found items. A final twist for tracking prospects is the addition of objects dropped by people other than yourself. Be warned - this can be so much fun for the dog that he'll gladly show you all the neat trash dropped by other folks along the street, in the rest areas, etc.! John has been shown some unusual objects by his dogs while simply out walking.

3-2-1-FIND IT

Use a favorite toy or even just a stick that you come across in the woods. After a few moments of playing with object, hold the dog as you throw the object into grass, brush, woods thick enough to lightly disguise the object. The dog may see 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. 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, and of course, the heaviness of the cover (one good reason to avoid mowing your lawn regularly!)

THINGS THAT GET LOST IN THE NIGHT

Using the same rules as 3-2-1-Find It, 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. Once again, don't worry that he's "cheating." 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 get too enthusiastic and 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.

ONE & ONLY

This is a more advanced scent game, but extremely useful to teach the dog the concept that only one object is desired from a group of similar objects. I normally start this with tennis balls or other of my dogs' favorites). Play with the dog for several minutes with the One & Only object you'll want the dog to find. This allows your scent (as well as lots of good dog spit) to thoroughly cover the object. Then move off to an area where you have planted several similar objects. Throw the One & Only into that area, using a 3-2-1-Find It technique. If the dog picks up an incorrect object, say nothing as you take it and put it down or pocket it, but with enthusiasm, give the FIND IT command again, leading the dog back to the general area to be searched if needed. Obviously, when the dog gets it right, reward this with a minute or two of play before repeating ONE & ONLY again. This can be combined with the more difficult levels of 3-2-1-FIND IT for really advanced discrimination by the dog.

Once your dog has mastered these games, any formal scent discrimination exercise becomes a snap for that educated nose. Furthermore, you have learned to understand just how powerfully discriminating a dog's nose can be, and to trust that when it comes to working in a world of scent, your best bet is to follow the guy who knows what he's doing - your dog.