

My Pet Has Issues!
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It seems like so many dogs have problems, like barking, anxiety, or destroying things while their families are away. What can I do to *prevent* my dog from developing behavior problems?

After the basics - food, water, and shelter - what your dog needs most is mental and physical stimulation. Many behavior problems arise in well-pampered dogs who do not receive enough stimulation to exhaust pent-up energy, release anxiety, and exercise their bodies and brains.

Imagine how your dog would spend her time, if left to her own devices. Her favorite activities would be walking and running, identifying objects by their smell or movement, chasing and catching, digging, and rolling in a soft patch of grass. Instead, she lives in the human world. How do the activities you do with your dog address her instincts? The natural world provides constant stimulation for our animals, but unfortunately, we are often too busy to do the same. Below are a few ideas for giving your animal the attention and stimulation he needs.

Walk your dog frequently – daily if possible! Walking with you is the closest your dog comes to migrating with her pack, and this can enhance bonding and make the dog much more attuned to your body language and signals.

Engage the natural desire to track and catch objects. This may take the form of playing Frisbee, chasing a ball, or simply running around with you, taking turns chasing each other. If you're already doing these things, try a new twist – play “hide and seek”. While your dog is distracted, or in another room, hide the ball or Frisbee (or yourself) and ask him to find it! This engages the dog's sense of smell and desire to track in a way that chase games do not.

Provide a digging area. Digging is a normal dog behavior. If you have a dog with a strong digging instinct, you have a choice to make: try to teach the dog not to dig, which typically results in an unhappy dog, an unhappy owner, and holes all over the yard, or designate a digging area where your dog can dig safely. Some owners place markers around a small portion of the yard, while others have creative solutions, such as doggy sandbox, or even a pile of blankets inside the house where the dog can bury his toys.

The most important thing we can do for our dogs is to care for them. While we treat our dogs as family, they are not human, and have different needs, desires, and joys than we as have. Naturally, this means allowing them to be dogs, and encouraging natural and normal dog activities.