

A PET LIGHTHOUSE GUIDE:



Brightening Their Days: Meaningful moments for dogs with limited horizons



Dr Caroline Allen FRCVS

Brightening Their Days

INTRODUCTION

When a pet faces a complex health journey- whether they are navigating a long recovery, managing a chronic condition, or approaching their senior years- it can feel overwhelming.

As a vet with over 25 years of experience, I have seen how easily the medical focus can overshadow the daily wellbeing of the animals we love.

This guide, Brightening Their Days, is about finding the joy and connection, even when horizons are more limited.

At the heart of the Pet Lighthouse approach is a commitment to quality of life. Understanding how your pet experiences their world every day, from their physical comfort to their emotional wellbeing.

By shifting the focus from simply "managing a condition" to "optimising a life," we aim to ensure that every day remains worth living, whether your pet is recuperating from surgery or navigating a more limited horizon. This focus is at the heart of the Pet Lighthouse philosophy



www.petlighthouse.co.uk

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'C. Allen'.

Dr Caroline Allen FRCVS
Founder, Pet Lighthouse

Table of Contents

Introduction	02
Who is this guide for	04
Rethinking the walk: From miles to moments	05
The power of the Sniffari	06
How to encourage a positive walk	07
Food games and enrichment	08-11
Scent work and tracking	12
Touch	13-14
The name game	15
Considerations for all games	16
The joys of licking	17
Seeking support	18
Building a trusted team	19
Let's Light the Way Together	20

An important note:

This guide is designed to support you and your pet's journey, but it is not a substitute for professional medical advice.

Any concerns regarding your pet's health or wellbeing must always be discussed with your primary care vet.

Pet Lighthouse works alongside your vet to provide the extra time and space needed to navigate these deep questions, but your vet remains the essential partner in your pet's clinical care.

Brightening Their Days

Who is this guide for?

We all know the saying “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks”, luckily for us that saying is completely untrue!

Mental puzzles and learning opportunities for our older and recuperating pets can be a really great way of keeping them active, entertained and stimulated, especially when it may be harder for them to go out for a long walk..



Jess enjoying a Nina Ottosson Dog Brick

The exercises here are presented as a guide. It's important that you check with your vet what is appropriate to your individual pet and that you consider what is safe and enjoyable for them. A fun food enrichment game for one dog can cause frustration and upset for another.

Bear in mind their mobility, their dental health and any other health issues.

If your dog is recovering from a procedure it is vital to check with their vet that any games are suitable.

Rethinking the walk: From miles to moments.

For many of us, the joy of having a dog is defined by long walks and covering miles. However, when a dog is in recovery or navigating their senior years, those long distances may no longer be possible.

While this shift can feel frustrating, it is an opportunity to remember that a walk is for the dog, not for the pedometer.

Dogs don't need to travel miles to find satisfaction.



In fact, for a dog, sniffing is more exhausting and rewarding than running. Their sense of smell is their primary way of exploring the world- it is essentially their "social media" and newsfeed.



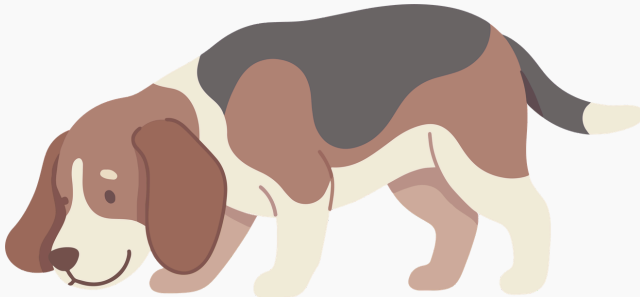
Jess sniffing in the local park

The power of the “sniffari”

By slowing down and allowing your dog to lead with their nose, you provide intense mental enrichment that tires them out more effectively than physical exercise alone.

The Key Benefits of Sniffing:

- **Mental Workout:** A dog’s brain dedicates 30% of its capacity to processing scents. A "sniffari" is a cognitive challenge that breaks up boredom.
- **Stress Relief:** Slow, deliberate sniffing lowers a dog’s heart rate and blood pressure, promoting a calmer, more optimistic state.
- **Essential Communication:** Sniffing allows dogs to "read" their environment, gathering vital information about the world around them.
- **Natural Joy:** Engaging in scent work releases dopamine, the "feel-good" chemical, making for a much happier companion.



How to encourage a quality walk



- Follow the Nose: Let your dog choose the route and stop for as long as they want to investigate a scent.
- Use a Long Lead: If safe and appropriate, a longer lead gives them the freedom to explore without the tension of pulling.
- Quality over Quantity: A 15-minute session in one small patch of grass can be more fulfilling than a three-mile hike on the lead.
- If your dog is not used to sniffing you may need to encourage them through the “find it” game- see later.
- If you are worried about your exercise, explore options for standing work outs - squats and leg movements can be done while waiting for your dog!



Seek guidance from your vet for the distances your pet can comfortably cover.

if your pet is sore and tired after a walk, in spite of appropriate pain relief take note and be sure to reduce the distance next time as well as telling your vet.

Food games and enrichment

You don't need a lot of time to get started, in fact little and often is better for most pets, especially when they are older.

Do a few sessions a day and limit them to 5- 10mins max.



The first principle of food games is that the food and treats you use are not on top of your pet's daily meals, but should replace some of it. That way your pet won't get overweight.



You can use some of your pet's daily allowance for the games. In some cases this may not be interesting enough, in which case think about the calories in the treats you are giving and compensate accordingly.

Remember that raw food can carry bacteria that are unsafe to people.

If you are feeding raw food don't spread it on anything that won't either be thrown away or thoroughly washed separately from other items.

Simple Food Games

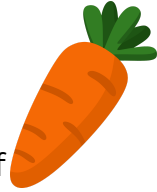
- Treats or food hidden under towels, cups, or mini-cones
- Treats or food hidden in egg boxes or cardboard boxes, scrunch paper up inside
- Try puzzle toys (start easy and work up to avoid frustration)
- Feed some/ all of the meal via interactive feeders or snuffle mats- if you pet is comfortable to stand in position for long enough



Jess exploring a kitchen roll inner

- For senior dogs or dogs with osteoarthritis keep the items close by and avoid slippery floors. You can try different textures on the floor by using yoga mats or other textured surfaces.
- Monitor your dog with new feeders and mats to ensure they do not chew and eat things that they shouldn't!

Simple Food Games: Scatter feed / “find it”



- Pick an area on short grass or rug to start with. To start, use fingernail-sized pieces of safe, healthy food such as carrot peel. Or you can use a small piece of treat, even tuna flakes (from a tin with springwater), or part of the dog's daily meal. Stick to dry foods on the rug!
- With your dog able to see what you're doing, toss a few pieces onto the ground and say “find it” to your dog.
- Repeat a couple of times.
- Let them focus on the food while you do something different.
- Refrain from pointing out treats (this increases arousal), and your dog doesn't need you to do it! Your dog will learn that “find it” means “there’s tasty food here if I use my nose”.
- After a few days of this, use smaller pieces of food, and toss the pieces into an area 1m² so that your dog is encouraged to use more “nose power” to find the bits.
- You can increase the size of the area and reduce the food size further, but to avoid causing frustration don't go above an area 2m².



The Indoor Scent Safari

There are lots of other ideas you can try with your dog at home.

Mix and match games to keep the interest levels up.



Sports cones brought cheaply from resale sites can provide a hiding place for treats.

**Jess seeking
tasty treats!**

Felt snuffle mats hide dry food or treats, encouraging the natural foraging behavior that can help promote a calm, focused state of mind.



**Dinnertime
snuffle-style**

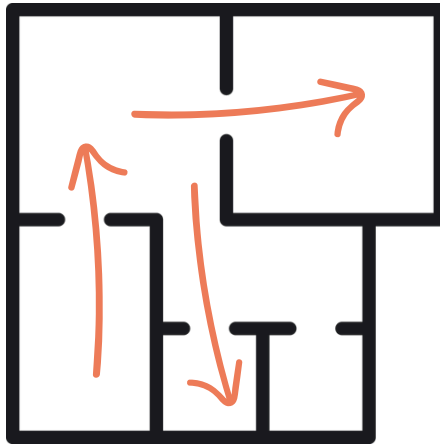
Scent Work and Tracking

As well as using food to encourage sniffing and foraging behaviour you can also train your dog to follow other scents- this helpful link explains more about scent work:

- <https://edinburghdogbehaviour.com/scent-training-made-simple/>

You can also train your dog to track indoors. Although designed for lock down (and some of the videos are quite long) this site has some information about how to do this:

- [Dogtaggs Indoor Tracking Guide.](#)



Touch

- Otherwise known as hand target, also known as “Touch”. If trained effectively it can be used for many things, such as to get your dog's attention back onto you, instead of fixating on something scary, and as a fun focus exercise.
- Make sure you have some treats and your clicker ready. You can use a marker word if you are not using a clicker.
- Put a small treat under your thumb whilst your hand is flat.
- Present your flat hand in front of your dog's face.



When they move their face towards your hand to take the treat, release the treat once their face touches your hand and use your marker word or clicker.

Repeat this 5 times. Each time put a treat under your thumb and your hand behind your back so you can re-present it to your dog.

Jess knows this game as “Boop”. It can be a useful distraction if she is distracted by a barking dog nearby.

- cont

Touch - continued.

- Now do the same thing but without a treat under your thumb. Present a flat hand to your dog. Once they move their face towards your hand and touch it, use your marker word or clicker to mark the behaviour and then give them a treat.
- Repeat this 5 times. Be patient, if you show them your hand and they don't move towards it immediately, wait them out, they are trying to figure out what you want and this is where the learning is happening! Give them a while to work it out before you try again.
- If your dog doesn't understand what is being asked of them. Repeat step 2 with a treat under your thumb a couple more times to help them understand before moving on and trying step 3 again.
- Once your dog has touched their nose to your flat hand, after it has been presented 5 times, we can now name the behaviour, as they understand what is being asked of them. Do exactly what you did in step 3, but when you present your hand to your dog say the cue word "Touch". If you get 5 successful touches in a row, with the flat hand and the cue word, you can safely say you have taught your dog a hand target!
- You can use the hand target to encourage gentle movement and stretching in different directions for your pet.

The Name Game

Mental stimulation is just as vital as physical exercise, particularly for pets navigating a health journey or restricted movement. Teaching your dog to retrieve toys by name is a good way to get their brain working while strengthening your bond.

The Approach:

- Start simple: In a quiet space, place two familiar toys on the floor. Point to one, name it clearly, and encourage your dog to bring it to you.
- The reward: When they succeed, provide immediate praise and a small, ideally low-calorie treat. Consistency is the key to their confidence.
- Building the vocabulary: Repeat this until they recognize the first toy's name, then introduce the second. Once both are mastered, challenge them by alternating between the two.
- Progressive learning: As their "vocabulary" grows, add a third toy. If they pick the wrong one, don't worry - simply guide them back to the correct item and try again.



Jess with
"Star"
"Sticky-stick"
"Boney-O"
"Bally-ball"
& "Pulley-pull"!

Considerations for all games



Rescue clean cardboard boxes from the recycling

- Time-boxed: Keep sessions short to maintain high engagement and avoid mental fatigue.
- Listen to the "no": If your dog wanders off or loses interest, they are communicating with you. Respect that boundary- the goal is their joy, not a perfect score
- Success is key: Make it easy at first. We want them to feel like a "winner" to boost their confidence.
- Watch the surface: Ensure that activities happens on a non-slip rug or carpet so they don't slide.

The joys of licking



Licking has always been really helpful for Jess

- Licking is a natural, self-soothing behavior that triggers the release of calming endorphins.
- By using a textured mats and pots, we transform a simple snack into a therapeutic tool for pets who are post-operative, anxious, or senior.

The Approach:

- Choose a food that works with the surface (runny liquids vs. thick pastes). Use easy to smear food that your pet's digestion can manage, peanut butter*, mashed banana, tube cheese.
- Monitor to ensure the mat/ device itself doesn't get chewed and remove when your dog is finished.



- Your dog should have relaxed features and not appear "frantic" when licking. If they do then they may be frustrated by the slow delivery of food and this may not be appropriate for your dog.

***peanut butter must be free of Xylitol, most in the UK is, but double check.**

Seeking Further Support

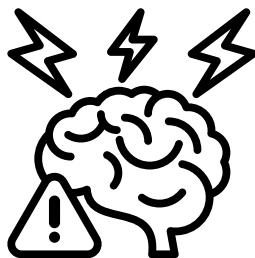
Specialised behavioral and training support is not reserved for the young or the "untrained."

For senior pets or those managing chronic illness, a qualified trainer can provide essential adaptations to maintain their cognitive health and confidence. However, the method of training is as significant as a medical prescription; it must be chosen with care.

I advocate exclusively for **force-free, reward-based** methods.

The risk of "balanced" training:

- Methods labeled as "balanced" often incorporate aversive (negative) techniques designed to suppress behavior through fear, startle, or physical discomfort.
- The long-term impact: A robust body of scientific evidence confirms that these methods trigger acute stress and can lead to long-term emotional trauma. This physiological stress can actively undermine physical recovery.
- **These methods damage your pet's mental state and quality of life.**



Building a Trusted Team

When seeking a behavioral or training partner, look for professionals who are committed to transparent, 100% positive reinforcement.

I recommend only working with practitioners accredited by recognized, welfare-focused bodies:

- APDT (Association of Pet Dog Trainers)
- PACT (Professional Association of Canine Trainers)
- ABTC (Animal Behaviour and Training Council)

The goal: emotional safety for your pet.

- True training should increase your pet's "optimism" and willingness to engage with the world.
- Providing support that heals and stimulates, rather than simply demanding "obedience" at the cost of their emotional wellbeing.

Other sources of information

Although the information on these sites is not specific to older/ unwell pets there are some helpful suggestions and ideas:

<https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/dog-advice/life-with-your-dog/enrichment/enrichment-activities-for-dogs>

<https://www.battersea.org.uk/pet-advice/dog-advice/brain-games-dogs>

<https://www.guidedogs.org.uk/getting-support/information-and-advice/dog-care-and-welfare/dog-enrichment-ideas/>

Let's Light the Way Together

We hope you found this guide useful. If you are navigating difficult decisions or worrying about your pet's health and wellbeing, Pet Lighthouse is here to support you.

- Curious if we're a fit? You can book a [free 10-minute introductory chat](#).
- Ready to dive in? You can [book a full consultation today](#) to begin crafting your pet's personalized welfare plan.

The Pet Lighthouse goal:

Independent expertise. Your pet's needs. Your family's reality. One clear plan.



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Thanks:

I would like to thank the behaviourists I worked with during my time at the RSPCA, who shared their knowledge so generously and helped me build my understanding of enrichment.

None of the ideas in this guide are new - this is simply a collation of techniques that are widely used and well-established in the field.