

How do toys help (or harm!) a dog's decompression?

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[Don't do this! It may look cute, but you could be overwhelming your dog!](#)

A handy guide to toys to get you thinking about **toys from the dog's point of view, how and why humans and dogs play with toys** and how they can **help or damage their physical and mental health**.*

Many adopters when preparing for the big day that their dog comes home spend hours looking at all the amazing dog products you can get online and very happy times going round the local pet emporiums selecting bed balls toys harnesses...

You name it. And of course any adopter wants to give the dog the best possible life; giving

- things **they never had before**,
- things to **stimulate the mind**,
- things that help to develop **healthy muscle** and connecting tissues for physical health
- things that help them **cooperate** with their new pack, human and other animal
- or show they **belong**,
- or to **bond** with/ get **approval** from the new humans.

Toys are arguably vital to a dog's well being, just like with growing children, and can even be [used as therapy](#) in most mammals of all ages! But at first dogs often have **no clue what toys are. Play, for dogs, is both natural and bred into them** by us, as you will see in our [play blog](#) but a rescue dog is likely not to have had that 'training' from their mum and dad (human or dog!) or so it's often up to you (and your resident dogs if you have any) to step up and **give them some clues**. However, as we say in many blogs but especially the decompression information- both the basic information on our website on decompression and the [psychology and physiology of decompression blog](#) , these well-meaning gestures can simply be **too much for the new dog**, especially if there is **no resident dog to cue from**. The new dog is unlikely to understand a big comfy **bed** made from materials they have never seen or felt before, or **collars** (when they need to have ID on by law), or the **overflowing toy box** in the corner at first so these things are likely to

- just **confuse** them- so they **avoid** it and **distrust** toys and accessories, or your hands (which are [play zones](#) when they have toys in them
- or **overexcite** them-so they wreck it while still on **high**

alert and end up **associating play and accessories with fear**, so they compulsively play with toys in a destructive manner to become calm, or fight a collar, or chew leads and harnesses when you put them on, which is not what you want at all!

As they won't understand English yet it's even harder to explain to them what it's all for without messing up first stage decompression. This is because you will be **showing them too much too quickly**. And as we always advise the adopters, for the **first two days absolute minimal interaction** is best due to quarantine requirements and for a smooth first stage decompression. But because even a decompressing dog can get **bored** and they can definitely get **frustrated**, make sure you do have wider selection of toys but out of their sight to hand to offer them should they show signs of restlessness or chewing the 'wrong' things or digging holes in the garden or floor. You may also do well moving the toy box away from them, or away from the main living space they mostly live in, to by the door so they can grab those and bring them to you in excitement or anxiety, when they are getting used to you coming back in, and not your shoes so they can work out their own motivation for using toys. But **chewing stuff whether it's theirs or not is natural to a dog** so lots of repetition is needed to ensure they stop doing it. And always **check they're not reacting to something new/stressful in their environment** like a house move or lots of new visitors/new places they've been to, perhaps before they are ready.

What do dogs see as toys?

The short answer? Anything and/or nothing!

We recommend during first stage decompression you have plenty of passive toys (ones that don't move, make noise or need problem solving) that bring **comfort**,



Plushies can make great comfort toys.

and **fleece blankets** and old **towels** handy (any size is fine from tea towels to bath towels and are also good for ‘accidents’ well as being more eco friendly than disposable puppy pads) for the first couple of days. These are materials the dogs will have encountered before as, thanks to the donations from the Lora’s Luck aunties and uncles we can send these items regularly to our rescue and foster colleagues so the dogs have some kind of continuity when they come home. This provides the dog with **sensory continuity that will not overwhelm** unlike a big fake fur bed or high sided soft bed. If the dogs are used to a bed at all it would be traditional plastic hard bed and blanket combination, so as a transition item that can be later used in the garden or away from the house, a plastic bed is easy clean and waterproof for occasional accidents. So a combination of hard bed and blankets can be very useful in the short and long-term. And the **blankets and towels can also be laid across the floor** leading to the door

to the secure garden so they have a familiar texture underfoot. They may **chew or play with the bed and blankets like a toy** at first, or **use ‘wrongly’ anything you put in their safe spaces**, so saving the expensive bed for later can also be cost effective. Plus you can use a blanket to **cover them or you** as part of **starting a bedtime or resting routine, fuss them through a blanket**, or put your **hand under it and move it** around to get their **attention and activate play instincts** in a very low impact way if they decide a blanket is a toy. This is a good way of getting them used to engaging with you indirectly at first. Some dogs will come to you before being ok with a blanket on them, others will prefer the security a blanket can bring first.

What adopters also do with the best of intentions is put **too many items in a dogs first stage decompression safe space**. We recommend as a maximum (but add or remove things taking cues from the dog unless fiddling with the safe space too much is bothering them. You might want to throw one gently between two humans or a human and a resident dog or other ‘cooperative pet’ like a cat so they can see what even a comfort **toy can be ‘for’**. If they show curiosity, you could gently throw or slide another toy like it, or a more interactive toy, in their direction.)

food bowl

water bowl

a couple of blankets or a towel that they can arrange to their liking

and a toy of each type (three maximum, and use comfort toys more to start with- see below!)

depending on what decompression stage the dog is in and whether the dog is displaying [kettle or lava body language and behaviour](#) . Or a combination of both reactions to the journey and meeting new people and animals in their new home. You may end up saving the fancy bed you bought for later, as it is

too much for them to get their heads round during first or even second stage decompression. But they usually get there in the end and most dogs given the option will eventually go for luxury every time (or they may eat it...!)

What do we mean by toy of each type?

For humans there are many types of toy, and the same goes for dogs.

And just like humans whether adults or children, when they play, **different toys** produce different reactions-and body language changes as the dogs feel **different emotions**- when played with. Of when they **feel a certain way, they play with certain toys**.

Of course dogs don't automatically know each toy has a 'purpose' in the same way you do reading this blog, so you may end using various toys for the same thing like fetch or tug. But to help a dog's state of mind it's always best to encourage them to use the toy that matches their mood, once they even get what toys are, or helps their mood rather than to overexcite and think that play has to be full on manic, as that's when stress and nips can happen. Our [how to play with your dog blog](#) will give you more on how to positively play with your dog.

You may notice your dog gravitate to or avoid a particular **shape, size, colour or texture** of toy, or **sound** or **smell** in a toy, over type of toy. This is completely normal.

Shape

Shape of toy can really help a dog to engage in a healthy way with toys.

[Odd shaped toys](#) like Kongs **bounce in unexpected directions** and have some of their raw food frozen in it, treats or something else high reward inside and can be more **exciting** for a more confident dog in later stages of decompression. Such things may startle and confuse a new dog so gradually introduce toys of irregular shape and see how

they are with them, gauging it against where they seem to be in decompression.



Kongs also come in different sizes, colours, and durability ratings.

So you could consider toys that are **more predictable** in **movement** and **easy to hold or catch in the mouth**, like round (spherical) balls and frisbees. Because the shapes are so different and noticeably so to a dog and even more so when it is moving, you can get a dog to associate a **different shape with a different type of play**, keeping **balls and discs for fetch**; and **ropes and soft snake shapes toys for tug** games.

Sticks are harder to categorise as you have the wood smell texture and taste to take into account so go with how the dog interacts with them. Some dogs totally ignore them on a walk but engage in the garden, or not at all: others prefer walks holding and sometimes chasing after and retrieving a stick, ball or frisbee.

Sometimes the **prey drive/care drive** in them will **recognise certain animal shapes**, especially when they are **moving**.

They can actually tell, and often by using smell, what the shape of their toy is! Or recognise when a **toy looks like food**. Toys that smell like food, or the relaxing herbs which are usually very appealing to dogs, can be a good way to introduce toys to a dog that seems especially clueless. This of course can encourage chewers, so common sense and balance of different toys is always best. But for a dog, **knowing when they can bite down on a toy and when they can't** is something vital for them to learn, and would have usually been taught to them by their parents, siblings or extended dog family.

This is called Proper Bite Inhibition and **all dogs must learn it in order to play properly and without stress or fear. So we can't stress enough, do not use food for play or play training till they have learned at least two other types of toy.**

Size

As with all toys, size can be important, but in relation to behaviour when dogs encounter toys of different sizes. If your dog likes to rag toys about- **shake** or chew them like prey, or grab and pull out all the stuffing- then a toy the size of what would be usually **prey** in the wild (chicken or duck for example) is best. If they like to gum them, **sleep with them or lie on them**, then **oversized ones that mimic a mum or very small ones to activate caring for a vulnerable small animal or feel like a pup or sibling they lost** could be the way to go. Toys that are too small are a choking hazard for bigger dogs of course, and we always recommend **human supervision with all toys**, especially with a new dog.

Also they may **chew off a small part of a toy** but find comfort or even nurse that part of the toy long after the rest of the toy is destroyed. This could be because they feel a bit **overwhelmed** with the entire toy, or **hoarding/saving** some

for later, or that's just how they want to engage. It could even be a version of sucking/suckling on toys. That is usually because they were **taken from their mum too soon**.

Colour

Dogs are not colour blind in the way people think, and see **much more than just black and white**. However, they only have two 'colour cones' in their eyes (blue and yellow) not three like us and do react to some colours more than others. Red can look dark brownish-grey or even black to a dog. And yellow, orange, and green all look like **yellow** to a dog. Blue is a good colour for a dog to see usually, and purple looks the same as **blue**. When interacting with a dog, they can't tell the difference between a red ball and a yellow ball in motion, they are just following the movement of the toy, and checking how you're reacting to the toy. If the toy seems important to you, they will learn to use it more. But it's a good idea to **try different colours of toys** especially **blue** and **yellow** and see which the dogs notice more naturally. As they engage more with interactive toys and you, you could line up a couple of toys the same shape and size but a different colour, like balls, and see where they go first.



Were you expecting this?



Can you see which colours are missing for dogs?



So which toys, no matter what the type, size or shape, might they be more likely to go for?

With this in mind, and the fact dogs have **different type of sight to us**...due to the position of their eyes on the sides of their head, we can see why **colour is often less important** than size, shape, texture, smell or sound to them, and that's ok. It's just how dogs work and knowing this can help

you play better with them, and choose better toys for them.

- They have **less depth perception** than us (like things looking close or far away in paintings and photos when we look at them)
- They will always **see moving objects better**.
- For **distances**, humans with perfect eyesight are said to have 20/20 vision. This means that we can pick out letters or objects at a distance of 20 feet. Dogs typically have what's called 20/75 vision- they must be 20 feet from an object to see it as well as a human standing 75 feet away. This is why if you're recalling your dog on a walk, it's better to **move** about and have **obvious hand and arm signals** for recall else **they may simply not see you!** Certain breeds do see more like humans though. Labradors, the typical dogs used as guide dogs, are bred for eyesight closer to how humans see as possible and may have vision that is closer to 20/20.
- Also, because of the position of their eyes, almost **anything closer** to them than the length of an old style school ruler (12 inches/30cm) will be a blur, with a **'blind spot' under their noses**.

So make sure your dog can see what you're doing. So keep the toy (and your play zones like face and hands, see our [play blog](#) for more info) in their **clear sight line** and they will be a lot happier to play with you. Plus a **face too close could get nipped**. The same goes for the toys and food and water you put in their safe space. Make sure it is a good foot away from the area you have shown to be sleeping space with blankets or basic bed.

Texture/taste

Of course dogs **feel things with their mouths** as well on so many levels. So the texture and taste of a toy will be very linked.

Most comfort toys are made from **fleece or fake fur**, with or without stuffing to feel full or empty. More durable interactive toys can be made of **rubber or dog safe plastics**. These are two very different textures in our hands so you can imagine how much that is magnified when the dog investigates them with their mouths.

Some are actually **food**, like antlers and pizzles,



[Yes, actual deer antlers!](#)

which take a long time (days or weeks) to eat (usually!) All of these of course will **feel different in the dog's mouth and help them to know which kind of play they are doing this time.**

We don't recommend you play tug or other kind of play or special/solo attention with a food toy, but jobs like fetch and retrieve/ hide and seek with the food toy is fine, as well as sometimes using them to **learn basic**

commands like sit, lie and wait.

Your dog may be very texture sensitive and so **may not go for fluffy or soft toys**, but instead prefer other toys with less direct toy contact/more associated with food like snuffle mats or agility tasks. Or vice versa.

But there's no need to see chewing as a bad thing provided you make sure **they know what's ok to chew**.

The [benefits of dog toys for chewing](#) include:

- improved dental health
- stress and anxiety relief
- gum relief for teething puppies
- reduced destructive chewing
- provides a positive outlet for mental stimulation

Just like toys and engagement with their humans and other dogs can! So the **toy can have many 'layers' to it** to engage **all the dog's senses**, and more multi layered toys can be introduced as the dogs decompress.

Sound

Most dogs like toys that **simulate prey**. This is why [squeaky toys and soft toys](#) are often very popular with most dogs.

Hearing the **high-pitched** squeak when ripping apart a soft plush toy or stimulation toy can be immensely satisfying to some dogs. But not all. Some dogs express **maternal concern** when a toy squeaks, or they get **scared of it and run** away. Some even like the squeak till it suddenly stops then get upset because they think they have harmed it. So toys that have animal sounds in could also go either way. But for dogs that are [in 'hunting mode' due to the high pitch](#) of the noise often won't stop playing with their toy until the squeaking mechanism is broken, i.e. they have **"killed" it**.

The sounds emitted by a [squeaky toy give your dog instant feedback](#) that their bite is strong and effective, which keeps them stimulated to continue playing and satisfied by their progress. So you could use sound toys to get them

learning **how to bite properly** as this blog talks about earlier. So the natural urge to chew on a squeaky toy, motivated to engage by the noise, improves your pet's tooth and gum health. According to [Pets Web MD](#) dogs who are active chewers have **less plaque buildup** than those who don't.

As a result, squeaky toys not only satisfy your dog's desire to chew but also make their mouths feel better by massaging the gums and scraping the teeth.

Like any other toy, it's best to gently try a dog with a sound reward toy and see **how they react during play and how they process that play afterwards when they are resting (and they must rest during play as our [play blog](#) says!)-** are they **hyped up** still or did they **have a good sleep** between plays?

The second possibility is normal, and even to be encouraged as it mimics who dogs would play with their siblings or in their pack, being hyped up after play means it's currently too exciting for them and you may want to go back to noise free toys for a while; or try ones that [just crinkle](#) or make animal noises. We had a dog that was obsessed by one of those cow toys for kids you turn upside-down to make the noise! Or if they're further along in decompression and play stops quickly just being offered a squeaky toy as that's boring now, they need more, you could get variations like bouncy squeaky toys or talking toys (see below) you can throw for them or switch on so they move by themselves to attract the dog's attention; just so they have **motivation to continue play**. As the dogs do often see them as prey, however, it is

best not to play tug with a squeaky toy.

Much better to use a toy that makes crinkling noises for tug, then they won't get their instincts too confused. However beware of them turning their attention to crisp packets and other human times that make similar sounds.

Just like with any other toy, supervision is also advised.

Those **squeaker parts are small** and can be a [choking or bowel obstruction hazard](#).

Smell

Always consider the smell of a toy. Plastic and rubber ones may smell especially odd. If possible, wash them in your normal (dog safe) washing powder/liquid, or dog shampoo to **make them all smell similar.** You can also sleep with the toys so they smell of you, and provided your resident animals are 'kind' to new toys, get them to sleep with them as well, so all the 'pack' smells are present on the toys. The same goes for dog blankets, duvet covers, pillow cases and the like where practical. This can mean they consider any and all of them as toys so **take great care if/when you include 'human' items in play.** [Pet perfumes, shampoos and cleaners](#) that are dog safe and not too strong can really help a dog 'tie' to where they live now; and feel confident enough to play; faster.

With all decompressing dogs toys you **can-and we recommend you do- insert into a toy or bed natural aids for relaxation** such as **calming herbs** like [catnip \(yes! it works as a relaxant for dogs\)](#) or [valerian](#), or a dog safe ticking clock can really help. Don't worry if the dog eats the herbs! They usually **love the smell** and both herbs are dog safe in the amounts you'd put in a toy (2g per 5kg of dog for catnip- depending how overstimulated they are, 2g is about one pinch of it between finger and thumb) or their dinner (10-20ml of Valerian mix tea per 10kg of dog). Catnip toys for cats [shop link] are great for small dogs that are dog safe and not too strong can really help a dog 'tie' to where they live now; and feel confident enough to play; faster that way.

They will soon recognise when a **toy looks like food** and know that it usually tastes like food too. **Plastic or rubber fake food toys** aren't something we'd recommend as they could be confusing or disappointing to the dog because the pay off doesn't match the shape.



[This sort of thing is on sale- why is giving a dog that looks like human food a good idea?!](#)

It's best to keep toys with food in (puzzle games or long chew animals parts like antlers etc) and real food (meals) separate. Or you could [scatter grain free dog biscuits as treats](#) (not meals, we raw feed), or dog safe dried fruits on the rug or lawn to find to show them it's fun.

Toys that smell like food, because they are treat or food filled Kongs, with [relaxing herbs](#) mixed in, or use the herbs separately in a comfort toy, which are usually very appealing to **dogs to dig or chew out**, can be a good way to introduce toys to a dog that seems especially clueless. This of course can encourage chewers, so common sense and balance of different toys is always best. But if they're **scared/in first stage decompression, don't do food toys**. You don't want them **linking food and fear**.

And of course, **toys that smell of the other resident animals** could be a good or bad thing. It can be likely to make

them **less likely to guard** toys but it may also make them **feel they have no toys of their own**, so always have some brand new but worn in smell wise as above toys on hand as well as ones your current dogs have 'borrowed' before the arrival of the new pup, or (well washed) ones from a previous dog.

Hopefully you are beginning to realise what can be a toy to a dog and how to use them in a way that develops a healthy and cooperative bond between you, your dog, and any other resident animals.

You may find you knew and did a lot of this already but didn't know why. And having that sort of 'dog instinct' is something that usually can't be taught. But it can be practised so the adopter can **feel natural connecting with the dog in a dog focused way** rather than a **Disney film** or **heavily edited animal 'welfare' or 'training' show** or a self professed **'dog trainer' on social media** (especially useful for first time dog adopters!) which is why we write all these blogs and guides for adopters as well as offering our online live support services for all adopters old and new. The **best kind of experience, even when you have a lot, is to keep getting experience!** Keep reading and trying out new ideas and methods with your dogs. Dogs **may choose their own toy of any type**, or as we have said, use the blankets and towels as a comfort or even an interactive toy (see 2 below) and often take great **comfort in things that smell of you**. This is why they rummage in laundry baskets, run off with things like socks, shoes, flip flops and even oven gloves! Anything you use regularly but do not clean after each use is fair game. **They are learning you**, and it releases **'happy hormones' like oxytocin** when they can smell you, and even seeing you smile. So yelling at them for running off with a pillow case or something is not the way to go- what they are likely doing is saying that

- they are **ready for a more interactive toy or play** (see [play blog](#)) now,
- or it's all going a **bit fast for them** and are displaying **stress** behaviours.

The more you learn your dog, you more you'll know which it might be.

And as you can hopefully see by now, if dogs engage with different toys depending on their mood and what they have known before, you can turn that around- the **toys and types of play your dog selects can give you vital clues on exactly where is decompression** your dog is.

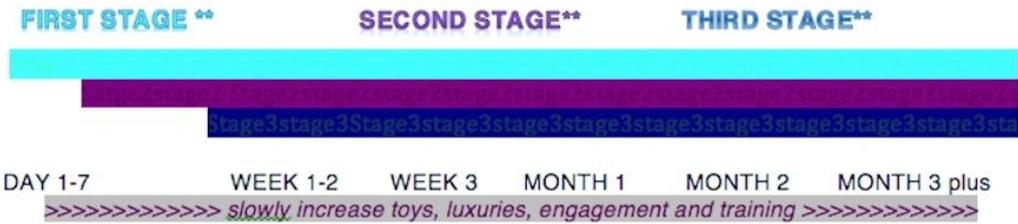
Here is a list of toy types and of average order that you can introduce them to the dog of course as we always say **one size never fits all and dogs decompress at different rates** with toys just like they do with toilet training, recall, socialising and getting used walks.

1. **Comfort (or sensory, though all toys are sensory of course) toys**
2. **Stimulation toys- Educational/puzzle toys with or without a food 'payoff'**
3. **Interactive toys (fetch, tug)**
4. **Toys that move independently (or sensory)**
5. **'Dolls' - realistic toys that look like animals or human babies**
6. **Physical activity and dexterity toys (digging pits, agility, flyball)**

DON'T FORGET! Toys can have more than one 'job' or be more than one type of toy at the same time as well!

The decompression stages are not the same in every dog and often overlap

How the stages of decompression can overlap*



*Different roles, jobs and skills decompress at different rates. A house confident dog cannot be assumed to be automatically walk confident for example.

Recall or toilet training can kick in at any decompression stage.

However, they may not understand indoor living basics like beds, toys and other training till second or third stage decompression. They may also engage with toys differently in and out of the home. Some dogs need no walk toy; others won't get full stimulation without a good game of fetch. Some walk better with treat training; for others it's too much stimulus and just commands work better.

The key is to know the default of the dog's character from the rescue and look for behaviour and engagement changes as the dog returns (or not) to their default behaviour and body language as these usually indicate a move to the next decompression stage.

****KETTLES MAY LOOK LIKE THEY'RE RUSHING THROUGH THE STAGES BUT THEY ARE NOT- THEY ARE FAKING IT. LAVA DOGS SEEM TO TAKE MONTHS THEN SUDDENLY THEY ARE VISITOR AND WALK READY.**

BOTH HAVE BEEN DECOMPRESSING- SO NEVER DO TOO MUCH TOO SOON!

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So it's not easy or advised to have a strict cut off for the three stages of decompression. It is constantly evolving, and sometimes stalling and occasionally going into reverse for a while. It is a natural mental and physical process of settling in to a new place. So choosing, motivating and developing play with toys will be trial and error, and seeing what works.

It will also be not beating yourself up if you try a toy and it's a disaster- they are scared of it so much that it sets back decompression, for example.

COMFORT TOYS

For first stage decompression no matter what the age of the dog is, it's often best to start with **comfort toys**. These are ones that have fake fur, fleece, natural materials like cotton or wool or other comforting texture for sensory engagement (they can see, hear or feel a comforting item.) and/or they make soft noises. For a dog being adopted alone a fake fur or fleece toy can help them **feel less alone** as they settle in. But any of the **toy types may provide that comfort to a dog**, so make sure others are around. They can and will **use any toy for comfort and this is ok at first**. Plenty of time to learn toy functions once they are noticeably moving towards second stage decompression, anymore active play like agility etc once obviously out of decompression.

You may want to get **stuffing free toys**, which can often be **safer for toy chewers**. Though for some **pulling out the stuffing is the pay off or reward**, as it mimics actions they'd do in the wild.



They look guilty because they think you're going to shout at the mess.

not because they think chewing is bad- chewing is a NATURAL dog thing! It releases stress and boredom. Want them to chew less? Do more with your dog! Find out what they like and do more of that. If chewing toys is their favourite, just keep supervising and buy in bulk 😊

Or ones that are not durable but are very soft and non threatening.

However, unless they show positive or calm (not suckling or desperation) nurturing reactions to toys that make 'excited' or 'high pitch' noises (such as **squeaks**)

we would not recommend putting a squeaky toy in the safe space during first stage decompression as the 'prey' noise could overexcite (kettles) or scare/get fixated in those first days and (if very lava) after arrival.

Signs your dog is happy with the toy is often **licking it or cuddling** with it with little damage but some dogs will get **comfort from fulfilling their hunting instincts**. As long as long term they have no problem with you taking the toy clearly consistently and fairly to show play time is over (etc) then they are not developing toy possessiveness or guarding. But such a trust bond with your dog will take time to develop, so make sure you, your kids and visitors **do not try and randomly take any toy-or food- from a dog** especially if they are playing in their **safe space**.

Soft and fluffy toys are comfort toys because they reproduce the 'feel' of a mum, siblings or kennel mates, as well as using them to **hone hunting instincts**, Some will '**collect**' and **store them, even suckle them** in beds or underfoot in a pile; and get comfort from a pile of them or an oversized one, or a small one to take care of. This can be very common in a **dog separated from their mum, siblings or puppies too soon**.

How they act with comfort toys can give you a **clue to their**

breed mix. For example, **gun dogs** and **herd dogs** tend to like to carry toys (in general) and 'push' toys ahead of them, so you may have a dog with Labrador or Retriever in should they be a toy carrier, or a Collie mix if they try and 'herd' or collect you (!) or your belongings or their toys.

If your dog is herding, or showing repetitive or even compulsive behaviours (e.g. chewing something more than once they know is wrong but it's like they can't help it) they need more 'jobs' around the house like more skills in training, different walks, or multi sensory toys.

These breed mixes are also less likely to 'hurt' the toy as their breeding encourages them to bring it back to the human unharmed. With **terrier** mixes, the **toy may not survive...** but one size never fits all and with some of the crazy mixes we sometimes get, it's best not to be too breed dependent when you are analysing your dog's actions. And never forget, **we bred them to do this stuff**, so you need to be realistic about how much importance you put on your personal possessions and how well you can stash them out of dog reach till the dog gets past the excessive chewing stage(s).

Of course **food can be a comfort 'toy'** too. But it's much better for 'solo' play, as really they are **stimulation toys** (see below) because they are **chewed**, have **texture** and release a pleasant **taste**. For chasing after in human-dog direct play they can work, and as a **recall and training** aid.

But be very careful going past or engaging with a dog with food, whether it's you or them that has the food. Show them you're **not a threat: no sudden movements, get out of their personal bubble (assume it's the same as Covid social distancing)** and **don't try to take food away** from them till they

have completely finished decompressing.

STIMULATION TOYS

Stimulation toys include items like

- lick mats,
- snuffle boxes
- and Kongs,



One of the many types of lick mat out there. This type has suction to stick to the wall and can reduce bath anxiety. Or they could just eat the mat, which is this blogger's personal experience. 😊

or durable food chew treats like antlers, with which the dog can **engage themselves** for the most part.

There are parts of these toys they **should not eat**, like the Kong skin or the lick mat base, or toys like [Nylabones](#) are to be **chewed, not to be eaten** should pieces come off. This could particularly help

- a **nervous dog** (and kettles can be nervous too with some things -like new visitors- not just lava dogs),
- or a dog that does not immediately go to the food or drink on arrival;
- or a dog that does not seem to bother with (comfort/other) toys.

These toys often combine a **game with some kind of food reward**, so can also be **puzzle** toys, or toys that help develop motor skills. They may **devour** the reward or the durable chew treat, **hide or bury** it, **collect** them without eating them; or want to **sleep** with it. All these actions can give you clues to a dog's state of mind, or where there may be during decompression. [Boredom is reduced by encouraging your dog to play by himself!](#) Here stimulation toys are especially beneficial when you're out or when the weather is too poor to be worn out with a long walk. **Bored dogs can become destructive or even fear aggressive/reactive.** Toys that release small treats or are made for chewing are good, or sandpits in better weather. We have already said why a dog may **sleep with, collect or cuddle with a toy**, and it's not always for a happy reason. **Neglect or family separation too soon** can make (all toys but even more likely to be with) comfort and stimulation toys super important; sometimes too important and they may get possessive or go into **guard mode**. If they [bury them](#) this could definitely be **worry they will not be allowed to keep them**, or even due to being **overwhelmed by too many toys** in their space. Or it's the breed mix- [lots of terriers and hounds love to dig](#)- or they think it's a good game. You can **break the hiding/burying cycle**, however, when it's

desperate or fear based and this is by showing them nobody will take their toys (again, who knows what happened to them before they come to you) or that good things will happen (praise, play, a treat) if they bring back the item they hid or buried. Or giving them a digging area or sandpit(see Physical Activity and Dexterity Toys below.)

Always **beware of introducing food based engagement too soon**, so you don't activate the **dog's psychological need and hormone and bred by humans drive to love and bond** with

1. **fear** hormones ([adrenaline](#)),
2. **play** ([serotonin and dopamine](#)) and these hormones you will both feel in play, bringing joy and contentment
3. or **hunger** hormones([ghrelin](#).) The desire to **eat is very strong and will affect decompression badly** if food is not introduced in a consistent and healthy fashion.

This is why you should **never use food to control your dogs-
do not**

feed them less to calm them down,
substitute food for time with you,
give treats for no reason/pay off
only treat train or only use food toys.

[Oxytocin is a powerful 'love hormone'](#) all mammals have and if you mess up decompression, this chemical releases into the system no matter what they are experiencing and displays the same behaviours as a 'happy' dog. The [same set of hormones- oxytocin, adrenaline, and serotonin, are released when you play with your dog.](#)

And let's not forget [sex hormones](#) and puberty, or [fear stages](#) common in pups from 7 months old!

Decompression is an absolute **minefield**, so please, **always listen to and follow the rescue rules and guides** on how to

do it. Take **regular pics and vids of your dog** so you can see **changes** big and small, and **learn your dog every day!** Your dog can be stressed and confused but 'seems happy' as they never properly decompressed in the first place so you never saw relaxed body language to know the difference.

This is when **bites 'out of nowhere' and sudden and radical behaviour changes** can happen. They moved up the '[ladder of aggression](#)' without you even realising. Sadly at this point, you can't rule out [neurological issues like distemper](#), not without a lot of expensive tests anyway, but **9 times out of 10 it is incorrect decompression** and with a **complete reboot** (as if they have just arrived and are in **quarantine**) with rescue support, or in an experienced foster home, the dog can get back on the right track, and not need pharmaceutical intervention long term or, worse case scenario, putting them to sleep.

INTERACTIVE TOYS

There are **interactive toys** like **balls and ropes** that are **more fun when there is another dog or human also engaging.**

mental stimulation and combat boredom, as well as satisfy a wide range of [natural instincts in the dog](#). Never put food in an interactive toy.

Of course, an **interactive toy like any other toy also has stimulation and comfort functions**, else it won't work to interest the dog. Together, these functions make a **great stage two decompression and beyond toy** for your dog as they involve more senses and excite the dog more.

They have **shape, texture, size, colour, smell** and sometimes **sound** for the dog to get used to, process, and start to enjoy- just like stimulation and comfort toys. However there is the **added dimension** of using them to **interact with you** (humans.) So they may **take time to realise what these toys are for as well as use them confidently**. Use our [play blog](#) for top tips on how to encourage such play in your dog. All the **benefits** below increase many times with interactive toys but are present in all toys. And of course dogs may choose to turn any toy they have into an interactive toy.

- Mental stimulation

Interactive toys encourage your dog to **solve problems**, from how to get the big toy from you, to how to get you to start engaging with them in a way that the game can continue which can **strengthen both their bond** with you and their **mental faculties** and **prevent dementia later in life**. This has been proven true for both [humans](#) (sometimes called fiddle products) and [dogs](#). It can even help with dogs with some conditions like [Cognitive dysfunction syndrome](#) and allied with a top quality diet, can [increase the quality and length of a dog's life](#). **Hide and seek** tasks, not just using a snuffle box, but hiding objects they know to be fun (and smelly!) around the home and garden can add more to this engagement too. You can also

start simply by narrating what you are doing (like 'I'm making a coffee, want to come too?') in happy tones what you are about to do around the house. When a dog is **happily bonded to you they want to know what you're up to and will gladly follow** you as you do it. This is different kind of following you when decompressing- that kind of following you is fear based and when a dog's doing that they are best ignored.

- Weight control

While they're **no substitute for walks, interactive toys** motivate canine couch potatoes into moving and engaging you. Plus until they are ready for a walk because of decompression toys get them used to more and more interaction safely which makes them less likely to be reactive when out and about.

So interactive toys can **bridge the gap** for a new dog between indoors and outdoors: of being on and off the lead. And therefore a good indicator of where they are in decompression- if they're **ready for walks they are definitely in third stage decompression** in that regard.

Meals as well if the dog is a super fast eater can be put in an **interactive toy to slow them down**.

- Stress and anxiety relief

When occupied, dogs are less likely to engage in potentially destructive behaviours caused by stressed or anxious emotions. While decompressing this is likely to be more obvious. So starting with just two or three toy types is better as **they can choose how to expand and make sense of their world**, which will **help them decompress** and thus become **less anxious**. So where they can focus on playing

with toys and/or you instead, this is likely to cut down chewing incidents and stealing food incidents.

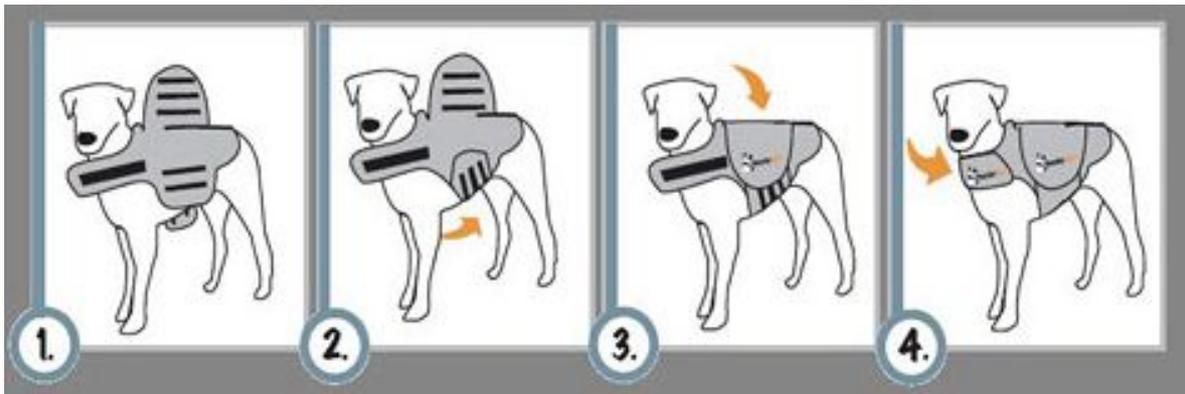
- Give a job to do

Most dogs like to be busy, and this can be **accentuated by the breed mix** they are (Collies and Shepherds like to herd, greyhounds like to chase, terriers like to catch things, many dogs are bred to be service dogs like Labradors who love to problem solve, and so on) so it's important to **give them a job before he finds one of their own**. Such a 'job' could be 'helping you' (eating!) your hobby, or remote control for the TV, or burying your hat. So interactive toys detract the dog from all those human things in the house, and therefore might help extend the life of your shoes and sofa cushions! This may extend to **interactive outdoor experiences like obedience and agility** classes.

(SENSORY) TOYS THAT MOVE and/or MAKE NOISE

As we have said when we talked about sound, squeaky toys can **remind them of prey** and **hone their instincts** and **motor skills**, to help develop **healthy muscle** and a **healthy mind**. Some dogs love a moving toy for solo and **direct play [playblog]** with their humans- with these, making a noise as well is optional because, as we said when we talked about colour and how dogs see, movements are very likely to result in the dog wanting to play. As is often the case, a **lava dog can be intimidated by a self moving toy or a toy that activates** in some way when they engage with it. This of course is not advised for decompressing dogs in general due to their 'startle reflex' (a bit like the **Moro reflex in babies** where bright lights and sudden movements seem distressing and threatening), just like adult humans can be shocked and react to unexpected lights and noises!

But it's usually best with this type of toy to **think of your dog as a very bright toddler** and see to their needs accordingly. [In this link here](#) for toddlers and what to do with them, we can easily transfer the tips there to stressed dogs by using **thundershirts, distraction and comfort toys**, and **not relying too much on food**.



[Thundershirts can calm a stressed dog especially in firework season. They act like 'swaddling' an infant, or a weighted blanket.](#)

Although some dogs, like human babies and toddlers, can be calmed by the lights and sounds, [don't blast TV programmes at your new dog or have lots of overhead lights on at first](#). Use nature and meditation videos on your TV, or try various talk or soft music radio stations on very low volume and slowly increase it when you find ones(s) they like.

Typical toys that make a sound we tend to just call squeaky toys, but you can get **stimulation and interactive toys combined** where they have to find objects or areas that squeak inside a bigger or moving toy or puzzle. [Other specialist squeaky toys](#) bounce, squeak and vibrate every time a dog picks them up, bouncy barking toys, electronic 'smart balls', automatic ball launchers, LED bouncy toys, and even talking toys, laser pointers and many more. Some these toys are great for **sight or hearing impaired dogs**.

Again care must be taken that dogs do **not fixate on human 'toys' that also move** like Roombas, Christmas decorations, toy cars, battery powered toys or dolls, and the like.

A **toy** like this is **much safer than a food toy** to use to **engage in direct play with your dog**. They still get an **instant rewards** like a sound or responsive movement, but it won't **get mixed up** in all the other **strong and scary hormones** boiling around in a dog when they first arrive in your home.

'DOLLS' - REALISTIC TOYS THAT RESEMBLE ANIMALS OR BABIES

These 'real life' dolls are for **more advanced toy work** with your dog and **should never be used in any other role than its shape** suggests- such as a rabbit, kitten, puppy or human baby; or larger sized animals in proper scale. Often used for

- [human dementia patients](#)
- humans who have suffered great personal loss as a grieving tool,
- or to **'train' young kids** on how to be (caring, appropriate feeding, walking, picking up 'poo', not squeezing too hard) with a pet before you bring one home forever.
- **First time adopters** from the happy bus could use one of these they bought for the dog to 'practice' collecting the dog safely from the bus, or [practice](#) the toilet-food-drink-sleep routine that is necessary on arrival for at least 48 hours for quarantine. They could even get one and treat it like a real dog to see they're up to what can be a great challenge adopting a dog for the first time. or practice play actions and body language [blog] on them.

they can also be used to train dogs **to get used to or take**

special care around young and/or small animals. Like the sensory toys, they will 'walk' and make the noises the real animal or human baby would make. Due to the **electronic parts**, and the specialist kind of play you would do with your dog with these, they should **never be left unsupervised** with a dog. You can use them to check for possible reactivity of dogs to cats and other small furies and they may gravitate to it as a comfort toy which is fine provided they only want to lie with or cuddle it, and not play.



[Not a real dog.](#)

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND DEXTERITY TOYS

An extension of a **stimulation toy with a puzzle or food reward payoff**, for doing **prolonged or longer distance activities**, but involving either/or

- more **equipment**
- more **direct interaction** with their humans
- and a **larger or different area** to do them than the home or garden (though you can try them out with it in the home and garden of course)

with which to play could be good for a lot of dogs.



A typical 'flyball' course. They tackle jumps twice, once to the ball board to grab a ball, then back over to reunite with their human. Marks are deducted for dropping the ball too soon.

Typical toys/activities that you can encourage a dog to play and be active in a bigger area are

- **Hide and seek** with toys that have a food payoff in other parts of the house, garden and on walks/in play fields
- **stacking toys** or push button toys with a high reward/ repetition (also stimulation puzzle toys) but using them in more high stimulus areas like the garden or other people's houses when you visit
- **sandpits** or a digging pit, where they can dig and hide toys (but beware! You must let them know that other garden areas are off limits and keep it clean of waste and old treats.)
- **agility exercises** like pipe tunnels, stick weaves, obstacles and jumps of various colours and heights
- **flyball-** a jump or other course of some sort where the payoff of grabbing the ball at one end and delivering it back to the handler back at the beginning

Again these are **more advanced activities** but even a more timid dog when they are allowed to take their time can enjoy them, especially as they usually involve **direct play and interaction with their humans**. However as agility toys and play and flyball direct play is a **high adrenaline, energetic, fast paced and addictive** activity

Only try this type of play/toy/activity with your dog

- once you've **tried the other categories of toy** and slowly

expanded their world so they can **cope** with all this high impact toy and interaction stimulus

- once you have a **good bond** and they already have **some recall**
- Or if they start **expanding their worlds themselves** with their toys, burying them in the garden or furniture
- or wanting to take **toys on walks**
- or do **more structured activity on walks** and so on.

However, don't worry if **they don't engage with toys at all!** Above all, don't **rush them into play**. They may stick to comfort toys, or only like to play with mostly you. As long as they're happy and **aren't reactive or destructive** they are showing you what level of play they want. Or some dogs especially the older ones at the kill shelter they will never had a toy and would have puppies make do with what they could find. So **they may have the mindset of everything is a toy, or that nothing is a toy**. They will need to learn what is toy and what isn't as well no matter what their background. So items that resemble human items you don't want chewed are definitely off the menu...

TOP TIPS

1. **Never give a dog a human item as a toy such as socks** or an old shoe. And if they try to play with these items positive encouragement is the way to go: replace with toys you would prefer them to play with after gauging their mood and seeing which of the three toy types what match the behaviour. And when they transfer their attention to the toy and stop going back to the things you do not want them to chew reward with praise and the occasional high-value treat.
2. **Try not to rely on treats** to get them to engage with toys or train at all else your dog could go off with anyone who has them.

3. Never **rush a dog into anything**, let alone something as **important as play that has such an impact on their minds and bodies**. Just try one or two toys a foot or so away from them at first and see what types, colours, sizes, shapes and so on of toys they go to first, on their own time, not just a few minutes, or even days.
4. If a **dog reacts negatively to a toy**- runs from it, barks at it in a stressed way, or turns away, **remove it** and try others of different size shape texture or colour. **Don't use food toys** at this point else they could associate food with feeling stressed. Leave the toys close by then move right away.
5. **Do not expect them to engage right away** especially after rejecting a toy or engagement with you
6. **Do not tell them off for not playing**
7. **Do not invade their sleep or safe space to play**
8. **Always have breaks** in play, even sleep times, **as dogs' natural play stops and starts**.
9. And if in doubt, **'reboot' your dog as if they have just arrived and they're in quarantine**. Just give them space and time to process anything new and **don't expect too much too soon, if ever**.

So if a dog that doesn't play is a deal breaker for you, you're **not ready for a dog** quite yet. They **won't come to you knowing how to play** usually, let alone how YOU play, so a **good adopter lets the dog choose what is fun**, with guidance, praise and support.

To check you're **playing with your dogs old and new in a way they can understand and have fun with**, [check out our play blog](#).

*This blog is not meant to be, and can't be a complete list of

everything a dog could do while playing with toys and why- that'd take a whole book, maybe more. However it is a useful starting point with loads of live links (in blue) you can click on to do more reading and develop your own playing skills!

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