

# Tunnel Into Agility

By Christy Gammage,  
Practice Makes Pawfect

Of all the agility obstacles, tunnels are unique. While there are a variety of jump types and a couple of different pieces of equipment that the dog must run over or stand on, tunnels are the only obstacle that the dog must go into. Most dogs like tunnels; some dogs love them, especially terrier-type breeds that are bred to hunt vermin in tunnels. But all dogs should still be introduced to and trained on tunnels. Because tunnels can also be dark and scary until the dog knows what to expect. Large vs. small dogs may have a totally different experience.

Modern competition tunnels are a heavy duty vinyl with a wire spiral embedded on the outside of the material to hold the tunnel open to a 24" diameter. Common lengths are 10-20', but longer is not necessarily better. Nice features are reinforced openings with good traction on the inside surface. How a tunnel is held in place (so it doesn't rock & roll when the dog goes through) is as important as the construction of the tunnel itself. Pairs of shaped sandbags that wrap over the top and wedge in along the bottom are the most common method of holding tunnels in place. Alternatives are straps or fabric panels that go over the top and are staked into the ground. The more places the tunnels are bagged or staked, the better, particularly for large or fast dogs. Tunnels can be placed straight, in a gentle bend or shaped like a C or J.



However all this equipment is pricey and outside the budget of people just getting started. Light weight nylon tunnels specifically for dog agility are available online. The wire holding the tunnel is very widely spaced and the overall weight and durability is much less. Children's play tunnels are similarly constructed and priced. These can be used to introduce the dog to tunnels, but won't stand up to any hard use or being left outside. Some dog parks may have a solid pipe that simulates a tunnel. Note: The "chute" or a tunnel with additional collapsed fabric at the end is no longer used because of safety concerns. Alternatives to tunnel bags can be things like cheap backpacks filled with sand and strapped over the tunnel. Filled gallon jugs or buckets can also be used when the tunnel is straight. Hard objects on the outside of a tunnel can be dangerous when the dog runs into it while taking a tunnel on a curve. Also take care to not squash the tunnel when fastening it down. Whatever you use, make sure it is in good condition with no protruding wires, holes or dangling threads that the dog can snag a body part or toe on.

Training the dog for tunnels begins the same way you would train anything; with very small steps. Start by making it as easy for the dog as possible. A very short (like



2-4 feet) straight tunnel where the dog can clearly see through is a great starting point. Scrunch up your tunnel as short as it will go and fasten it securely in length and position. Have the dog in a sit or being held by a friend at the entrance.

Go to the end of the tunnel, get the dog's attention through the tunnel (holding out food helps). Yes, you will probably be on your knees. Then call the dog. If the dog tries going around, then just reset the dog at the end again and get the lure further through the tunnel. Don't throw food in the tunnel. Don't force the dog; it has to be their idea to go through. No luck? Is the dog afraid? Is the dog confused? Try to figure out about what and adjust. Hand feed through the tunnel for any step toward and into the tunnel. Or did you have success? Repeat until the dog happily runs through in both directions before making it harder.

Which part are you going to make harder next? Options: angle or distance from which the dog enters, longer tunnel length, new position in the yard for the current configuration. Work through these individually until the dog is happily



running through a straight tunnel at full length anywhere. Then start adding a slight bend so the dog cannot see the exit from the entrance. Work your way up to 90 degree bends or more depending on your tunnel length.

Some dogs will progress rapidly, others will take time to warm up to the idea of going through tunnels.

Go at the dog's pace to make tunnels fun for them. You will know you have succeeded when you start seeing "tunnel suck" as the dog chooses to take a tunnel instead of an other obstacle you indicated. But that is a different training article.

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