

A Tired Dog is a Behaved Dog... or is he?

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I was always taught and do teach that a tired dog is better behaved. It is true that many undesired behaviors can stem from boredom and a need for more exercise; however, it is what activity and how it is done that makes the real difference. There seems to be a trend among some dog trainers and such to recommend treadmills or loads of fetch to wear out dogs. We may be able to meet the physical needs of a dog through use of a treadmill, but at what cost? How many dogs only get to play fetch or will play it obsessively? What else could we be teaching dogs through only playing fetch? How many dogs are stuck in a rut of only one activity (formal or informal)?

Dogs need a combination of physical and mental activity. They need a balance of different kinds of activity. Treadmills, if used carefully, can be a great asset to a dog owner. However, treadmills are forced exercise. A dog cannot get off until a human takes him off. A dog cannot adjust his speed on a mill that is motorized. There is no ability to socialize a dog on a treadmill: no chance to see, smell or hear different things. If used as a supplement to other forms of exercise and with caution, treadmills can be a benefit to the dog and owner. If used improperly, you can create a stressed dog that may end up injured.

Fetch and other games are good if used carefully and in conjunction with other activities. Many owners feel a dog who consistently brings a toy back repeatedly must love the game. Some dogs become compulsive fetchers or may develop other stresses and behavioral issues due to the nature of the game: rush, get, and bring back, this ball/stick is mine (possession), etc. Fetch is also not a calm game – it is high energy. Dogs react to stress both physically and psychologically. Instead of just playing fetch or focusing on one fast-paced activity, mix it up. Allow your dog to use all his senses in games. Hide treats or toys for him to find. Work on lower key activities such as Rally along with fast-paced things like Flyball.

Dogs need a chance to do dog things: dig, swim, chew, play with other dogs, roll in dirt, sniff, run, walk, etc. Dogs do need physical and mental exercise and many dogs need a lot of it. The type of activities and how they are done, makes the real difference. Dogs not getting these needs met are more prone to issues; however, we as owner must give a healthy balance of activities. Integrate working with games. Throw a ball a few times, practice some formal training, and play a bit more. Ask your dog to find a hidden ball as opposed to just chasing it. If you use a treadmill, it should be supplemental to other activities, used carefully and only for a few minutes at a time. Instead, get your dog out for long walks, to play with other dogs, for runs in safely fenced areas, etc. Create stimulating things in the yard and home your dog can seek out without us forcing him into activity.

A dog that is getting a healthy balance of activities, both mental and physical, will be better off for it. This is just one step on the path to a long, happy and better relationship.