

PROTOCOL FOR CHOOSING TOYS FOR YOUR PET

Young cats and dogs are social and energetic—they need to play. The current scientific literature indicates that play is not really all about learning to hunt. Pet dogs and cats don't have to hunt to eat and if they did, practicing on a toy that does not itself "behave" will not help.

Instead, play seems to be about two important lessons: (1) learning to make mistakes, and (2) learning to recover from those mistakes. The most common mistakes are those involving communication, and good play skills can lead to good communication—an essential feature in social dogs and cats. Growing up for cats and dogs, as for people, is not about **not** making mistakes—it's about learning how to make mistakes **successfully**. The ability to learn creatively and to rebound from mistakes is the quality that allows social dogs and cats to deal appropriately with changing and complex social and physical situations. Cats, dogs, and humans who have difficulty with this quality often seem to have behavioral conditions, most commonly anxiety disorders.

Many of the principles of play are discussed in a companion handout, **Protocol for Teaching Kids (and Adults) to Play with Dogs and Cats**. The focus of this handout is on teaching about specific toys.

If we can teach puppies and kittens to play appropriately with toys, we will have minimized the chance of injury to humans that is often the unfortunate outcome of overly boisterous or rambunctious play. People with large, exuberant dogs—or with puppies who will become large, exuberant dogs—need to realize that these dogs are capable of inadvertently causing extreme injury or death. It doesn't matter if the dog "did not mean to do it" and that the dog was just "playing" or "saying hello." If the puppy or dog knocks down an older person, a person with a disability, or a young child, and that person is seriously injured or dies (and death can be the result of falling and hitting one's head), it will not matter to the dog that the injury is accidental. The dog will be blamed for the injury and his people will be held accountable. Teaching dogs appropriate outlets for their energy and play can minimize the chance of a tragedy, while simultaneously making the dogs a lot more fun to be around and making them happier.



A chase toy that allows a very young kitten to play safely, whether or not people are involved in the play.



A feather toy that can be dragged by the human to encourage normal, safe, aerobic play for a very young kitten.



A stationary version of a toy that plays back for a young cat.

Puppies and Kittens—The Role of Teething

Young puppies and kittens are learning about coordination and modulation or moderation of their behaviors, and *are teething*. They should have toys that will meet these needs. Most people understand that this is true for dogs, but many people do not believe the same thing is true for cats. **Both puppies and kittens can benefit from the same chew toys.**

- Food toys made from animal parts can be excellent outlets for chewing behaviors. These toys include rawhides, pig's ears, pizzle sticks, cow hooves, et cetera. Rawhides can provide good exercise for the teeth and massage for the gums. Rawhides can also be soaked and softened for small puppies or kittens. Potential problems exist, though, for pets who rip off huge hunks and swallow them without chewing them. For these cats and dogs, choking or

intestinal obstructions may be problems. You can avoid these risks by watching your pets when they chew and intervening if you are concerned. Some dogs and cats can have rawhides only until the rawhides become a certain size and then they have to be replaced with a fresh one to stop the pet from swallowing the remaining piece whole.



The importance of maintaining and checking toys. This Bouncy Bone is a synthetic bone inside a ball. Once worn, it can come apart and the pieces of synthetic bone can pose a choking hazard. By checking such toys regularly dogs can enjoy many hours of stimulating chewing with minimal risk.

- Some dogs and cats are allergic to the meats from which these food “toys” are made. Some dogs react to the flavorings or coatings with which some rawhides are processed. Dogs and cats who may be experiencing allergic responses to their food toys may vomit, have gas and/or diarrhea, or become very itchy and scratch a lot. Cats in particular scratch their face and lose hair. Also, please remember that in recent years there have been some serious concerns about health effects of some additives to some “treats” and dried food products. Know what you are buying and what the original source is. This will help you to avoid potentially toxic additives (e.g., melamine) and help you to avoid potential pathogens (e.g., *Escherichia coli*). The *Whole Dog Journal* (www.wholedogjournal.com) routinely reviews foods and treats.
- Finally, some dogs and cats become very aggressive around any food treats. Please remember that rawhides, pig’s ears, pizzle sticks, cow hooves, et cetera are *not* true toys for pets that are omnivorous or carnivorous: *they are food* and if the pet cares so much about them that the pet becomes aggressive, the situation is worsened by allowing the pet access to these toys. A companion handout, **Protocol for Understanding and Managing Dogs with Aggression Involving Food, Rawhide, Biscuits, and Bones**, addresses these concerns and makes specific suggestions for how to avoid associated problems.

- Kong, Planet, and numerous other manufacturers make rubber toys that have holes into which food can be placed. The rubber comes in two hardnesses, generally red for dogs that chew with fairly normal vigor, and black/blue for the heavy-duty chewers. These toys all come in a variety of sizes, some suitable for *cats*. The rule for any toy should be that it is 2 times bigger than the dog’s or cat’s mouth. If you follow this general rule of thumb, you will avoid toys on which dogs and cats can choke. Of course, dogs and cats can still chew off pieces of these toys and choke on the pieces or have them get stuck in their intestines. If you are observant and check the toys frequently, you will minimize these risks. Blue Kongs also contain a substance that will show up on radiographs (X-rays) if eaten. All of the members of this class of toys bounce in unpredictable directions when the dog or cat (yes, these come in small sizes and kittens love them) tries to get the food or when they bat at the toy. This action helps keep the pet stimulated, gives him more exercise, and makes it harder to obtain the food. In essence, these toys, whether used with food or not, “play back.” Almost any kind of food can be used to stuff the toys. Kibble can be mixed with wet food or dampened and then stuffed into the toy. Special biscuits that are big and get stuck in the toy can keep the dog or cat busy for hours. For really rambunctious dogs, the toys can be stuffed with wet or tinned food, peanut butter (consider using all-natural, extra chunky—it sticks their mouths together better, or low-calorie peanut butter for chunky pets), or cream cheese, and then frozen. The dogs and cats will then chew the toy for hours. If soft food is used with these toys, they must be cleaned regularly. Bamboo skewers work well to poke food from crevices. In addition, the toys can go into the dishwasher, although this will shorten the life of the rubber. Toys should be frequently checked for loose or missing rubber pieces and should be replaced when damaged to lessen the chance of choking or obstructing.



A dog enjoying a peanut butter–stuffed Kong during her appointment.

- Raw bones from sheep, cows, et cetera are seldom recommended for dogs in our modern times (unless one subscribes to a “raw diet” and there are cautions about *Salmonella* and *E. coli* transmission and shedding that should be discussed with respect to raw diets), but they can be given to dogs and cats if the decision to do so is well considered. Although chickens sent to slaughter are young, their bones splinter and unless the cat or dog was a street animal who learned early how to deal with these, chicken bones are to be avoided. Bones from sheep, goats, cows, and pigs may be given if they are the long, thick leg bones. Other bones splinter and should be avoided. Many people prefer to give their dogs raw bones with meat, tendons, and sinews attached. If you decide to do this you need to know your butcher very well. There are public health concerns for humans and pets involved with raw meat; some strains of *Salmonella* and *E. coli* can cause a fatal illness, and even if the dog is asymptomatic he can shed the bacteria, infecting humans. Immunocompromised humans are especially at risk. Unless you butcher your own meat and subscribe to and test for the highest hygienic standards, you may wish to consider avoiding raw bones. Bones can be cooked, but should be examined well after the pet has removed the meat and marrow. Many bones are brittle and can splinter. The tendency to splinter worsens with cooking. The dog or cat will be getting off lightly if all that occurs is a little diarrhea and vomiting. Slabs and splinters of bones can break teeth, pierce intestines, and become lodged somewhere in the stomach or intestines, all of which will require surgery.
- Large, hard, sterilized leg or shank bones are now sold as pet toys. These are much harder than bones you would cook yourself. Like the rubber toys, they can be stuffed according to the directions listed above. These bones also freeze well, and if you are using a soft food to stuff them, their length makes it a challenge for the pet to get all the food. Again, busy kittens and puppies have happy people, so any toy that the pet will work on for hours is a great idea. However, these bones can also splinter with time, and they can cause pets’ teeth to crack if the animal chews hard. They are not for everyone. There is no substitute for watching your pets and learning how they chew. This allows responsible decisions to be made. If you notice the bone splintering or chipping, replace the bone.
- Finally, please remember that some dogs and cats are very aggressive about food toys, especially “real” bones. The aggression may be directed toward humans or other dogs and cats in the household. A companion handout, **Protocol for Understanding and Managing Dogs with Aggression Involving Food, Rawhide, Biscuits, and Bones**, addresses these concerns and makes specific suggestions for how to avoid associated problems.
- Nylabones, Gummi-bones, and Booda-bones are other options for teething dogs and cats. Nylabones are synthetic hard plastic polymers that come in a variety of shapes from those resembling bones to those resembling funky shapes with nipples. They don’t splinter, and hunks are less often able to cause gastrointestinal problems. They can be great gum massagers; however, they are very hard and can cause some pets dental, gum, and mouth injury.

Like all toys, they are not for everyone. Gummi-bones are a softer, more pliant version of these. Their softness means that the dog can chew off and swallow hunks, and many larger pups can destroy one of these in an hour. Smaller puppies, though, benefit from the softer massage to their gums, and the more manageable texture. Booda-bones are pressed bones that often involve flavoring and a potato starch. They are relatively risk-free as far as injury goes, but *they are food* to the dog or cat. Accordingly, if the pet has any allergies or problem aggression involving food, these may not be the teething toys of choice.

- There are a variety of dental bones and rope toys available that have been developed to massage gums. The twisted rope toys are strong enough to use for pulling matching between pups and for using in appropriate games of “tug” with humans (see the **Protocol for Teaching Kids (and Adults) to Play with Dogs and Cats**) and have been made in a way that minimizes raveling of the toy. This is important, because long, loose threads can become lodged in an animal’s intestines and cut through them. When such damage occurs you have a true medical emergency that requires *immediate* attention. Any client whose pet is “splinting” with a hunched back as if their belly hurts, vomiting—especially if nothing comes up—or frequently straining to defecate, should check their pets’ toys and bring the toys and the pet to the vet immediately. Knowing what the object could be is a great help to a vet trying to treat an obstruction.



This dog enjoys chew toys, including ones that are dental toys and softer Gummi-bones. Toys for chewers like this dog should be checked daily to ensure that they do not pose a risk to the dog.

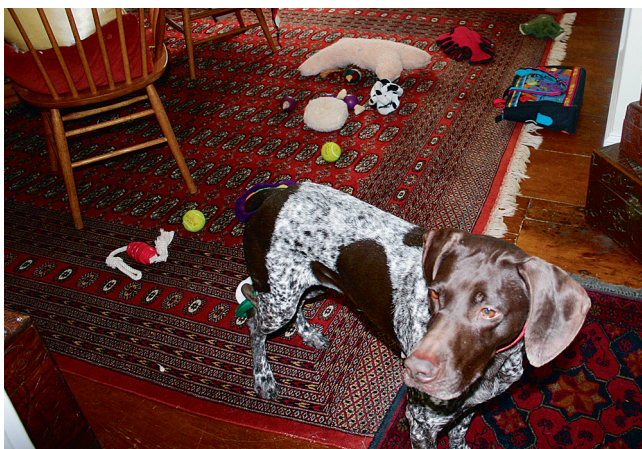
All Dogs and Cats

All of the suggestions discussed for teething puppies and kittens can also be used for older dogs and cats. In addition, there are other toys that are better suited to non-teething dogs and cats that should be discussed.

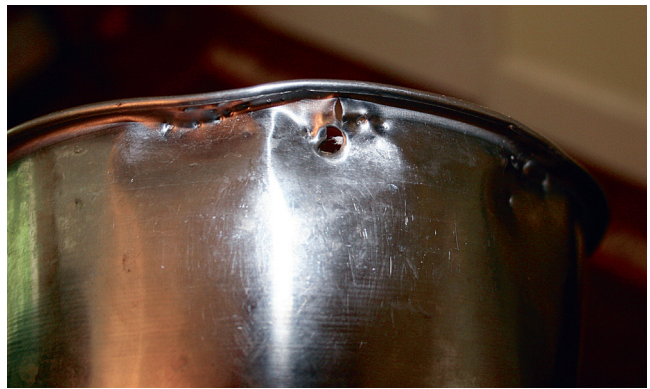
- Food balls and puzzles can be great ways to feed puppies or kittens and adult cats or dogs who are left alone a lot and who eat dry food. The Roll-a-Treat Ball (Play and Treat Ball for cats) and the Buster Cube are just two examples of these types of toys. Dry kibble is placed in them and the pet has

to move the toy around for the kibble to drop out. Both of these toys have adjustments so that the food can be made to come out more easily or with more difficulty. This is a great way to feed a pet who eats dry food while giving them some exercise. These toys also prolong mealtimes, which has health and behavioral benefits. You can also make very clever homemade food puzzles for pets who gulp their food and then ask for more. These puzzles can be particularly beneficial for overweight, under-stimulated pets. All you need is a large tray, some large stones, and some fairly sturdy, non-breakable containers that the pet can move with some effort. Then, you need to hide the food in a number of spots in the puzzle. If the cat or dog has to take his or her paw and move things around or tip them over, eating will be a long-lasting, more aerobic activity. Also, these puzzles are intellectually stimulating. Most of us are wasting our dogs' and cats' brains and intellect, so anything that helps to stimulate problem-solving skills is good.

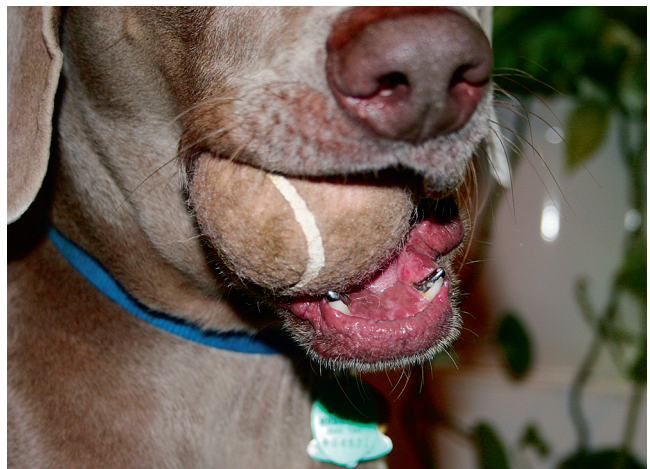
- Squeaky and fuzzy toys now come in thousands of sizes and combinations and most dogs and cats love them. As long as the toy is a pet toy—and not a human child's toy—the immediate risk from parts that can injure dogs or cats is minimized. However, many dogs and cats will dismember these toys to get to the squeakers and these squeakers can cause obstructions. **Check the toys frequently!**
 - If the soft latex toys are ripped—throw them out. The ripped latex can cause the animal to choke or obstruct.
 - If the plush toys are ripped—repair them or throw them out. The stuffing can become the focus of an obstruction.
- The dog or cat doesn't care about the cosmetic aspect of the plush toys—that's for you, the consumer—they care about the soft texture and the fact that they can grab and squish or throw around the toy. Again, get plush and squeaky toys that are 2 to 4 times bigger than the pet's head: if you are going to play with the toy with your pet, this size allows you to have your hands on the toy without the dog or cat having his or her teeth on you. Wash plush toys frequently—they can become fetid sources of bacteria. Check for and trim loose strings. Cats and dogs can swallow these, causing obstruction and cutting of the intestine.



A sample of toys chosen by this German short-haired pointer during her appointment. She has chosen tennis balls, Bouncy Bones, large and small squeak toys, soft and Tuff toys, soft toys that make animal sounds (duck and cow) and a chew toy on a rope.



An inappropriate choice for a toy: a metal water dish. Dogs who chew on metal can damage their teeth and gums.



Tennis balls, when enjoyed too much by some dogs, can be abrasive for their teeth. The young Weimaraner in the photo has already has two of his canine teeth capped because of damage to them from the ball.



A tennis ball toy that can allow two dogs to play safely or a dog and human to play without risking anyone's fingers.



Remember, dogs will not always play with toys the way you think that they should. This dog is using the same toy shown above to play with the water. Puppies often play with water. Most of them outgrow this, but some puppies benefit from being redirected to a toy from the water.

Toys for the Children vs. Toys for the Dogs

People often worry about how they can get the dogs to play with their own toys and not those belonging to the kids. This is simple: make a rule that can be enforced in your house about where each set of toys is kept.

- If, after play, the kids' toys go in a chest or on a shelf and the dogs' toys go in a basket, the rule is clear.
- The rule could also be that, any stuffed toy on the floor is fair game for the dog or cat, but if it's on a chair it is not. This rule can protect stuffed dogs and cats about which the humans care.
- Children must learn never to play tug with their own toys with the pets.
- All of these rules have two things in common:
 - They require the supervision of an adult human who is watching to avoid and prevent a mishap; and
 - They assume that it is much easier to prevent a bad or undesirable behavior from developing than to retrain the dog or cat to "unlearn" it. Prevention is easiest and best, but requires time upfront.
- If you are willing to invest this time, you will have very few, if any, toy tragedies. If you are not willing to invest this time, you should realize that you may not be meeting your pets' needs.
- Finally, big balls and flying discs now come in plush versions. These toys can be played with indoors with little risk to the human, pet, or furniture, although you may want to move anything fragile. Certainly, these toys are way more appropriate for indoor play than are tennis balls.
- Interactive toys like those on strings and ropes and those involving feathers can be terrific for housebound dogs and cats or those whose people are very busy. Kittens and puppies will chase toys that are dragged around on bungee cords and move when the people move. Many of these can be tied to your waist so that when you move so do the toys. Some exotic scratching posts for

cats involve spring and feather setups that keep the cat moving. These can also be rigged to provide the occasional treat if the cat really plays. The same principle of interactive play is involved in the plastic toys that have balls within them that cats or dogs can move and chase on a built-in track. These are all relatively safe toys as long as none of the parts are chewed off and swallowed. These types of toys are played with best if people get involved.

Specialty Toys

Many people want their pets to play flyball, chase and catch Frisbees, retrieve sticks, hunt, herd, or to participate in some competitive event. To do any of these well requires work and maturity on the part of both the animal and the human. Advanced play requires further skills than those used in basic play. Before any animal becomes engaged in flyball, Frisbee, et cetera, it is important to make sure that these activities are not doing the dog harm. Dogs with bad hips or knees should not be jumping up in the air to catch a Frisbee, no matter how elegant it looks when the person next door does it. These activities should not be performed on hard surfaces like asphalt, should not occur in slick weather like extreme wet or ice, should not occur on sloped or uneven terrain, and should not be required of any dog with arthritis, disk disease, degenerative conditions, or those involving chronic luxations. Remember, dogs should work up to the most challenging posture by learning how to do the early ones leading to it first. People are often more ambitious for their dogs than they are for themselves. This may not be a great idea.



This dog's preferred game is to catch balls. Notice the size of this ball. It was specifically chosen because even when she grabs it while running, she cannot swallow it. Size of toy matters.



In both of these photos above, the puppies have lots of toys. None of these toys entertain them as much as does another dog. Puppies need play with other dogs, and humans will benefit from the aerobic effect of this play.

Other Kinds of “Toys”

Finally, people often forget that **the best toys are those that play back—and the ones that play back best are other dogs and cats.** If your pet is social, look for or create play groups that match your pet’s temperament, physical size, and age needs. Dogs and cats that can play aerobically with other dogs and cats are tired dogs and cats. Tired dogs and cats are happy dogs and cats and they have ecstatic human guardians.

Cool Toys

Make notes about cool toys you have discovered here.