

Can't seem to tire out my dog... Ask a Trainer

By Nan Arthur, CDBC, CPDT

Dear Trainer,

How do I know if I am exercising my 1-year-old Lab mix enough? She seems tireless even though I take her to the dog park nearly every day, plus two walks of about 20 minutes each, but she never seems to slow down. I feel like all of my spare time is spent on my dog. I hope you can offer some ideas.

Signed,

Pooped out by Pup

Dear pooped:

It has been found that domesticated dogs living in the wild or natural states without humans, exercise much less than most would imagine, and it's not hard to envision how it wouldn't serve these dogs to run, play or fight, (such as we see in our pet dogs), for fear of burning precious reserves of energy, or becoming injured. Survival and safety are the first order of importance for dogs living in their natural habitats, just as it is on some level for our own dogs.

The dog that shares your home is still a canine with many of the same natural drives as their untamed counterparts, and it is those genetic components that hold the answers in terms of how much exercise is really needed for the dog living with you.

Did you know? Many experts are now saying, "Balance," is the key to keeping your dog in good physical condition without adding the extra stress from overtaxing his body with high excitement and overly aroused states such as seen during hard play or extensive exercise. These are all are capable of forcing dogs into an overactive stress response. This may be why many trainers and behaviorists are seeing dogs that are continually unruly, but are getting colossal amounts of exercise.

Physical exercise is necessary for a healthy body, just as it is with us, but your dog should be conditioned for the level of exercise you are asking of him. It is essential to consider the level of everyday exercise your dog is used to doing. Taking your dog for an infrequent run, playing an intermittent game of fetch, visiting a dog park occasionally, or if your dog is less than a year old and still developing bone and muscle, can easily stress his body with these types of infrequent, but high-energy activities. Stay within your dog's normal limits or begin a more rigorous exercise program that slowly builds endurance and muscle, and keep in mind that physical exercise is only a small step on the pathway to a calm and relaxed dog.

What is Mental Exercise?

A deeper look at a balance between mental and physical exercise is proving successful for many pet parents that were once unable to get their dog's impulses under control. By adding more mental stimulation, and keeping physical exercise to a conditioning level, many pet parents are finding more relaxed and contented dogs.

To achieve this, it is important to consider how dogs live in their wild or natural states. In the wild, dogs must fend for themselves each day, spending much of their time looking for food, which is taxing mental work. Even though your dog lives in the comfort of your home, he will still have inborn or innate drives that are part of being a dog, such as the need to find food.

When you put your dog's daily food ration in a bowl and it's gone in 30 seconds or less, your dog no longer has a job to look forward to for the remainder of his day, especially if your dog's drive for food is strong, or his energy level is high. This drive can rear its ugly head with destructive behaviors such as digging, barking, and chewing, all of which help to relieve the stress created by this mental void.

An easy way to augment your dog's mental exercise needs is to train him using food rewards. Training is a great mental outlet, and using food helps to satisfy that need to search and find the next meal. There are also many products available to keep the minds of dogs challenged and well exercised. Kongs, Buster Cubes, and many spin-off products are available to make feeding your dog a mental challenge, all the while satisfying that natural drive to find food.

Even something as simple as chewing bones or rawhides can provide a great mental and physical workout since chewing relieves stress, takes a certain amount of physical fortitude and has a wonderful mental component for most dogs.