THE NOSE KNOWS!

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I guess I'm not the average dog owner: I got a dog over 10 years ago because I wanted to explore what their noses can do. I purposefully got a working dog breed and started training tracking as well as search and rescue with her. I'm still on the same track (excuse the pun!) with my current dog. It always amazes me how much dogs love using their noses and how it tires them out. The days that I track with my dog, he is so happy and tired for the rest of the day that he can barely move. This got me thinking… I believe we would have less problematic behaviours in our pet dogs if we harnessed their noses to do something useful. Dogs have 300 million scent receptors while we humans have only 6 million, so dogs can really smell!

Introducing your dog to scent games doesn't necessarily mean dedicating half of your day to laying tracks. There are many less-time-consuming ways to harness you dog's amazing sense of smell.

Treasure hunts

Have you ever dropped a treat on the ground and then your dog just cannot stop sniffing and looking for it until he finds it? Or will your dog keep running around and sniffing the grass until she find the tennis ball you tossed for her? These are the easiest scent games: start hiding items that have inherent value for your dog. Treasure hunts for treats or your dog's favourite toy inside the house are fun games. Start with easy hides and slowly raise the bar to make it more difficult. When your dog catches onto the game, try shutting your dog in another room while you hide the treasure and then release the hound! This builds drive and enthusiasm. When your dog is frantically searching for the valuable, add a "find it" cue to the behaviour. Take the scent games outside as well.

Finding lost items

If your dog knows how to retrieve, start by asking him to retrieve your keys, wallet, or cell phone (but be mindful that they might get damaged in the process!). When he delivers the item to you, reward him with tasty treats. Next start gradually hiding the item behind a chair or under a rug or pillow and ask your dog to retrieve it. Remember to reward generously every single time! Start adding the name of the item as the cue – this game comes in very handy when you have actually lost the item.

Find a "lost person" (hide-and-seek)

To track a "lost person," ask a family member or a friend that your dog loves to first walk across an untouched patch of grass and then hide behind a bush with your dog's favourite toy or treats. Your dog can be allowed to see the process happening the first few times. Release your dog to run to the person to get rewarded. At first the game is visual, but gradually make the exercise harder: the person can walk a longer distance and start hiding in different places. Sooner or later your dog will start smelling the ground and air to locate the person of interest.

Detection dog game

You can use the same principle drug, bomb, or bed-bug detection dogs are taught: locate a scent of interest and report the finding to the handler. You can pick a scent you can easily find at home, such as a spice, tea, or an essential oil, put it in a jar, and start rewarding your dog for putting his nose on top of the container. This takes timing skills, so clicker training is my preferred choice. When your dog is fluent at poking the scent jar, you can start adding empty jars or jars with other scents. Yes your dog will poke the incorrect ones too, but sooner or later he will start gravitating towards the "hot" one more often, as only this one gets him what he wants. Next start hiding the scent and reward extensively when your dog finds it. There are a lot of nosework-type classes available to help you get your dog started with this game.

And last but not least, by far the easiest scenting activity that you can do after a long and tiring day is to toss a handful of kibble or treats on a large area of grass and let your dog sniff her way to them. Sit down and enjoy!