

8 Fun Scent Games Your Dog Will Love

Turn on your dog's nose & heart with these scent games

By Steve Duno | Illustrations by Taryn Gee

Though newborn puppies are essentially blind at birth, their sense of smell is fully developed and active. It's a dog's most powerful sense and the one we humans overlook the most. While we focus on what things look like, our dogs' attentions center on a smorgasbord of scents floating through the air: what the neighbours had for dinner; which raccoon walked through the yard the night before; if the retriever across the street just got a bath.



Masters of Smell

We have six million olfactory receptors; dogs have up to 300 million. Additionally, the part of the brain that analyzes smells is 40 times bigger in dogs than humans. This enables dogs to find lost hikers, discover buried truffles, or even locate cadavers beneath the water. It stands to reason then, that we should somehow be harnessing this amazing power in our own pets.



Once dependent upon their noses to survive, most domestic dogs today are a bit out of practice. But the good news is that, with just a little planning and patience, you can add fun scent games to your

dog's repertoire of behaviours and help her utilize this untapped smell power!

#1 Find the Food

This is a simple way to engage your dog's scenting prowess. It requires you to do nothing but place treats randomly around the home in the hopes that she will locate them by scent. Once she finds the first one (often by accident), she will quickly key into the possibility of finding others with her nose. Start by placing one or two treats down in full view, while she is out of the room.

Then call her in. She will eat them happily and look for more. Repeat this process, but begin placing the treats in less obvious places; in a corner, just beneath a sofa or [coffee table](#), or even partially beneath a doggie cushion. Place them while she is outside, or in another part of the home. Then simply let her find them on her own. You will soon see her scenting for them rather than looking for them.

Vary placement and quantity; some days just hide one treat. Once she "gets it," vary the hidden item. Try hiding a [food dispenser](#) toy filled with treats. Hide a feather rubbed with cheese. Hide a frozen cube of meat or broth (on a plate of course!). Then move it out into the yard and do the same, making it easy at first then progressively harder. Try hiding a chicken egg out there! You can even try this in your car or in a friend's home.

#2 Pick the Hand

Here's a simple way to rev up your dog's nose. First, get some small tasty treats that will fit into your hand. A bit of turkey meat or cheese will work better than kibble because of the former's stronger aroma. Next, take one into your palm and make a loose, palm-down fist. Then, with your dog sitting in front of you, offer her that fist, and let her sniff. While doing so, say "Find it!" Once she has sniffed it, open your hand and offer the treat, saying, "Good find it!" Repeat this a few times. Then, add your other empty fist. Don't let her see which hand you place the treat into. Next, move your closed hands back and forth, then offer up both to her, saying "Find it!" When she sniffs at the treat hand, say, "Good find it!" and open your hand to give her the treat. Repeat this, alternating the hand in which you place the treat. As you

continue, wait until you can see her nose really “alert” on the treat hand before opening up. The idea is to teach her that the location of treat varies and can be found only by scenting it out. Once she gets it, add a friend’s two fists into the mix, making it doubly hard for her.

#3 New Animal Scent

Dogs are born trackers of prey, other predators, and competitors. Take advantage of this by placing the scent of a new animal into your dog’s yard and see if she picks up on it. Try this outdoors only as dogs will often urinate over another animal’s scent as a way of reclaiming territory.



To begin, give an old towel or rag to a friend and have him or her rub it all over his or her dog or cat. If possible, have him or her get a drop of urine on the cloth as it contains strong scents. If not, rubbing it will do. Then, without your dog present, place the cloth out of sight somewhere in the yard, beneath a bush or behind a tree. Then let your

dog out and see what happens! You can try this randomly with the scent of different animals to keep your dog guessing. After trying dog and cat scents, try hamster, parrot, ferret—whatever you can locate.

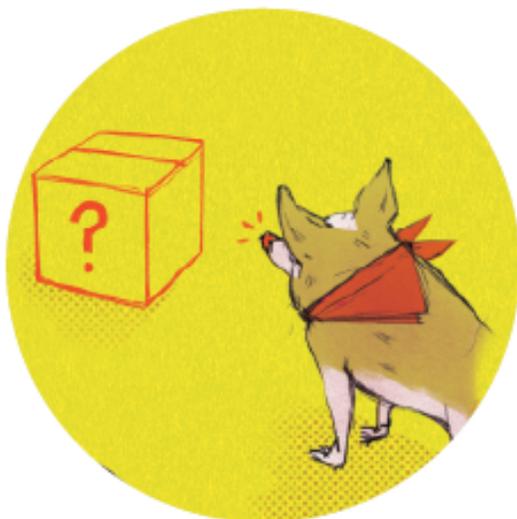
#4 Hide & Seek

Here’s one that uses you as the treat. While your dog is distracted somewhere in the home, hide in a closet, under a bed, or somewhere she wouldn’t normally expect you to be. Then just wait. She will inevitably begin searching for you. Once she finds you, praise and reward! If you are in a

closet and you hear her sniff at the door, you'll know she's doing what dogs have done for centuries. Next, take it outdoors to a dog-friendly off-leash wooded area, preferably with no one else around. Have a friend hold your dog, then walk off into the woods and find cover. Your friend should wait 30 seconds, then say "Where's, (your name)!" and release her. Your dog should scoot off with her nose to the ground, searching for you. Within a minute she should find you, at which point you should reward her mightily! Increase your distance over time until she can find you no matter how far off.

#5 Shell Game

This game builds upon the "Pick The Hand" game. Get four sturdy, coffee cup-sized containers that she cannot break or easily knock over. Avoid glass or paper; glass could break and paper is too flimsy. With your dog sitting and watching, place a treat underneath one cup then move it back and forth. Then say, "Find it!" When she sniffs at it, lift the cup and say, "Good find it!" as she eats the treat. If she knocks the cup over, that's fine. Next, add a second cup. Place the treat then move the cups back and forth a bit. Say, "Find it!" and let her sniff each cup. Wait until she sniffs the right one before praising and lifting the cup. Repeat until she reliably picks the right cup. Then add a third cup, and repeat until she gets it on the first try every time. At that point, you'll know that she's using her nose and not random choice.



#6 Where's Dinner?

While wild dogs have to track and capture food every day, our dogs know they will find a meal in the same spot every day. But what if, when you called her for dinner one day, her bowl was in a different spot? The answer is simple: she would instantly begin looking for it.

Try first placing it in the room next door; she will begin sniffing excitedly and find the scent-rich bowl in seconds. The next day, hide the bowl somewhere across your home and call her for dinner. It will take her a bit longer, but she will find it and wolf it down. Once you've established this game, move her bowl once or twice per week and make her hunt it down.

#7 Scent Trails

Food isn't the only thing dogs are interested in smelling. Unique scents such as essential oils (lavender, anise, and valerian work well) can motivate dogs and will excite their tracking instincts. To start, get a favourite toy (a ball works well) and put a few drops of essential oil onto it. Then, play a quick game of indoor fetch, followed by a reward. Do so several times in a day. The next day, with the dog absent, hide the same toy, then place tiny pieces of paper anointed with the oil onto the floor, leading 20 feet away from the ball, like a trail of bread crumbs. Then let the dog into the room where the trail begins and say, "Find your ball!" Most dogs will scent out the pieces of paper then eventually connect that the smell with the ball. Keep at it and praise when she follows the trail. If need be, get her started by showing her the first scented paper. When she does find the ball, reward her! Gradually reduce the number of scented papers until she can find the scented ball all by herself. Once mastered in the home, move it out into the yard. Then change the scent and the toy and begin again. You can use chicken fat, cream cheese, peanut butter—anything your dog likes.

#8 Find the Scent Itself

Instead of using a scent as a means to help her find a ball, you can teach her to search out the scent itself. This is a simple version of what drug and bomb-sniffing dogs do.

If you have taught your dog to find a ball by following a scent trail, you have already taught her to key in on scent. To begin, take the same scented ball and place it in a shoebox. Then encourage her to come up to it and sniff it by

saying, "Find your ball!" Eventually she will scratch and paw at the box, whereupon you should take the ball out (if she hasn't already) and reward her with it. Next, repeat this, only with three boxes, the ball in the original box (to prevent cross contamination). Say "Find your ball!" and work it until she succeeds. Reward her with a quick fetch session.

Now, instead of putting the scented ball in one of the three boxes, simply put a slip of paper in the same box, with a few drops of the same essential oil on it. Hide the scented ball outside, wash your hands, then place a new, unscented ball in your back pocket. Say, "Find your ball!" again, encouraging her just as before. When she homes in on the box with the scented paper, praise her mightily then take out the ball in your pocket and toss it for her as a reward. Repeat this over time, increasing distance and the number of boxes. In no time, she will be an expert tracker!

These simple scent games only scratch the surface of a dog's tracking capabilities. If your dog really takes to it and you feel so inclined, do a web search to locate a local tracking club and attend a introductory class. Who knows: your pooch could turn into a master tracker!