

5 Steps to Teaching Your Dog Fun Nose Work

Suitable for any dog, young or old, this fun training is designed to build confidence & focus & provide an effective way to keep your dog fit & healthy through mental and physical exercise. Great for reactive, hyperactive, injured or shy dogs, and even those with lack of hearing or eyesight issues.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- K9 nose work is a fun activity dog owners can enjoy with their canine companions; it evolved from the training professional scent detection dogs receive
- Nose work for fun encourages your dog's natural drive to hunt, coupled with her special talent for picking up scents and finding their source
- Any dog with a nose can get involved in nose work; it's great for all kinds of canine personalities, including reactive dogs, shy dogs, hyper dogs, seniors, pets recovering from an injury or illness, handicapped pets, and retired service and working dogs
- Dogs are driven by their noses, and dragging them through a walk too quickly can be a frustrating experience for a pup eager to explore the enticing scents wafting by; at least once a day, make a point to take your dog on a "sniffari" — allow her to lead and sniff everything to her heart's content

Dogs explore the world with their noses, using scents to paint a vivid picture that humans can't see. That's why giving your canine BFF lots of opportunities to sniff the world around him is essential for his mental and emotional well-being. If you want to give him some extra stimulation and fun, consider getting involved in K9 nose work, which encourages his natural hunting and tracking instincts.

K9 Nose Work

K9 nose work, also called nose work, fun nose work, scent work, and search work, was developed in 2006 and is sanctioned by the National Association of Canine Scent Work (NACSW). The activity is an offshoot of the training that professional scent detection dogs ("sniffer dogs") receive. Elements of the training are used in K9 nose work, but for recreational purposes only.

Nose work encourages your dog to use her natural hunting drive and unique talent for picking up scents and locating the source. The training teaches your dog to find one of three scents, wherever you decide to hide it. In nose work competitions, there are four locations involved in searching: interiors, exteriors, containers, and vehicles.

K9 nose work isn't an obedience-based activity. Instead, it works with your dog's natural instinct to hunt and track scents. There are few commands given during the activity, and no attention to the owner is required while the dog is working.

Any Dog With a Nose Can Participate

Any dog with a nose can participate in nose work, so you don't have to have a typical sniffer dog (e.g., a Labrador Retriever, German Shepherd, or Bloodhound) to get your pet involved in the sport.

Some dog guardians have found nose work to be a great supplement to a behavior modification program. Focusing on scent detection can help reactive dogs learn to tolerate the presence of other dogs. It can help shy dogs grow more comfortable with their surroundings, and it encourages distracted dogs to stay on task.

Nose work is also beneficial for **senior dogs**, dogs recovering from surgery or an injury, dogs with hearing loss or eyesight problems, and retired service, working or competition dogs. It can also provide a great outlet for hyperactive dogs and dogs with special needs that may not be able to leave the house easily.

How the Training Works

The first step in nose work training is building a dog's desire to hunt. Positive reinforcement is used for the dogs, while the owners learn how to read their pet's unique hunting behaviors and signals.

The next step is to add different search settings while continuing to build the dog's desire to hunt and the owner's ability to read their dog's behaviors and communication signals.

The third step involves continuing to build on the first two, and also communicating to the dog that one of the three target odors is what he should hunt for. Next, the dog is introduced to the other two target odors.

In the final level of training, the dog continues to increase his desire to hunt for the target odors, and the working relationship between owner and dog is tested with progressively more challenging search scenarios.

There are levels of training beyond the initial five, with the highest level reserved for dogs who will go on to enter nose work competitions.

Make Sure Your Dog Goes on Regular 'Sniffaris'

Often when dog owners take their **dogs for walks**, it's with the intent of getting around the block quickly. You may have a set path in mind, a time limit to stick to and the expectation that you're the one leading the walk, and that's fine — sometimes. But for your dog's happiness and mental well-being, giving her a chance to stop and smell the roses — literally — is important.

Dogs are driven by their noses and dragging them through a walk too quickly can be a frustrating experience for a pup eager to explore the enticing scents she's encountering. At least once a day, make a point to take your dog on a "sniffari." Let her take the lead and sniff, sniff, sniff to her heart's content.

Why Sniff Time Is So Important for Dogs

Imagine going for a stroll with blinders on that prevent you from seeing anything but what's right in front of you. This is how your dog feels if you're constantly pulling him along on your walk and rushing him past intriguing scents.

*"It would be like humans going on a hike and being whisked along too fast to visually register the trees, the flowers and the view of the mountains," Karen B. London, Ph.D., a certified applied animal behaviorist and certified professional dog trainer, wrote in *The Bark*.¹*

Alexandra Horowitz, Ph.D., author and canine cognition researcher, explains in the following short video how your dog's nasal architecture adds to his remarkable sense of smell:

If you can smell a whiff of perfume in a small room, Horowitz says, your dog can smell it in a stadium. When you walk by a tree, your dog can smell it — along with the birds and insects in it and even which direction they're moving in. Dogs also have a vomeronasal organ that allows them to smell things that can't be seen, namely hormones that animals release.

This can help them not only attract mates and decipher friends from foes, but also gives them insights into our emotional states and health, including pregnancy. Horowitz explains that your dog can even smell events that have happened in the past or those that will occur in the future:

"The most amazing thing about your dog's nose is that it can traverse time. The past appears in tracks left by passersby and by the warmth of a recently parked car, or the residue of where you've been or what you've done recently.

"Landmarks like fire hydrants and trees are aromatic bulletin boards carrying messages of who's been by, what they've been eating and how they're feeling. And the future is in the breeze, alerting them to something or someone approaching long before you see them."

Marc Bekoff, Ph.D., professor emeritus of ecology and evolutionary biology at the University of Colorado, Boulder, even goes so far as to say, "Not allowing dogs to sniff can be seen as a form of sensory deprivation that robs them of vital information they need to navigate their surroundings."²

Sources and References

¹ [The Wildest, December 13, 2022](#)

² [Psychology Today, November 7, 2017](#)
