

Homemade puzzles to enrich your dogs and/or cats daily life

There are many types of puzzles you can buy for dogs or cats in pet shops. Your animal will love them. But did you know you can make your own puzzles at home? Just have look at what you have at home, or in your shed or cupboard. If you keep some basic guidelines in mind, your imagination can be endless. It is a great way to spend some quality time together when, for whatever reason, you can't walk your dog. Five minutes of sniffing a puzzle will give your dog a lot of satisfaction.



Safety first

Whatever material you use, take a good look and consider:

- sharp edges
- small pieces your animal can swallow or choke on
- what happens with the material if it rips or tears? What will the edges be like then? Paper, for example can be sharp. So check your chosen materials for safety and suitability
- Hygiene: can you clean it easily? But also: what type of detergent do you use? How many chemicals are in it? Or is it single use only?
- if you have more than one dog, spend some quality time and puzzle with one at a time. Remember that food and toys can be a trigger for a disagreement or even a fight
- with cats it depends on the individual cat. Sometimes it is ok to puzzle with several cats at the same time. Others prefer to have some quality time alone with you.
- never leave your dog alone with any homemade puzzle.
- if needed hold the puzzle in your hand or on the floor. Dogs get easily disturbed by moving puzzles. Cats might like movement.



Made to measure

Homemade puzzles are for your own animal(s), so consider what your pet likes. Do they solve the puzzle with their paws? Their mouth? Or with both? In case of a dog, consider their size: do you have a Great Dane or a Chihuahua. Although I've seen Great Danes being very gentle and Chihuahuas who could be quite rough. But make sure your puzzle is the right size for little or large noses and paws. Cat's don't differ much in size, but their tactics can differ. Does your animal prefer hard or soft materials? With a little preparation you will find out what suits your animal best. And last but not least: what size of puzzle suits you animal? The height of the puzzle and the posture your animals need to have to stand or lie comfortable with it. Think again about the Chihuahua and the Great Dane. Also, age and health can be something to bear in mind and how to make it as comfortable as possible for you animal to have a fun time solving a homemade puzzle.



What do you need besides the puzzle

- a lot of small treats
- if your dog is used to a target mat it can be useful to have this too
- a big non-slip mat for both the puzzle and the animal or put the puzzle on carpet or other non-slip flooring
- a filled water bowl (sniffing makes thirsty)

How to start

Homemade puzzles are made from materials that we use in our daily life. For your animal they can be totally new or even when they know the material the use of it in a puzzle will be new. So think about how you would build it up step by step. Break it into small steps. There isn't a set end goal. It is about doing the puzzle together and not a competition of who can do the most steps. Enjoy the process!



Example step-by-step plan for the Muffin baking mould:

- Let your animal sniff the mould
- Put a few treats around it
- Put a few treats on and around the mould when it is upside down
- Fill some of the cups
- Fill one cup and put a smaller item on top, but never close the whole cup. It's important that your animal uses their nose to solve this puzzle
- Fill more cups and put more smaller items on top

Break it down into as many steps as your animal needs. Avoid frustration.



Tips & Tops

- When your animal is solving the puzzle don't speak. It will disturb the concentration.
- This sounds weird, but also don't praise your animal. The treat will do that job.
- Do not point out where the treat is. Go back to the step where your animal still was successful. And end there
- If filling the puzzle is too much for your animal to wait for. Give some treats on the floor away from the puzzle that will give you time to fill the puzzle again.
- If your dog knows a target mat you can use that too while you are filling the puzzle again. Don't forget to give a few treats on the mat too.
- Is there any frustration? Do not correct the animal but give some treats away from the puzzle and take the puzzle away. This way the session will end on a positive note.
- Every animal puzzles at their own level. It's not a competition.
- For dogs 5 minutes of doing a puzzle takes approx. as much effort as a half hour walk
- The concentration span of a cat is about 2-3 minutes.
- If a cat doesn't seem interested then try to throw the treat in the puzzle. Cats like to follow movement. In general outdoor cats are less interested in puzzles than indoor cats.
- Do not make it too difficult. If your animal starts demolishing the puzzle most of the time it is too difficult. Make your steps smaller. It is about enjoying the process together.
- Enough is enough. When your animal is tired or in any other way not interested. Give a treat and end on a positive note. Never just take away the puzzle without giving a treat.



Inspiration

- A towel you make creases in
- Old jeans you put on the floor. Use the creases not the pockets.
- A plastic basket with some plush animals and/or balls
- A cardboard box with empty loo rolls
- Build up a heap with plush toys
- Old wrapping paper
- A (silicon) muffin baking mould with some plush toys or other (not too) small items

Whatever you can think of that is safe and suitable for your animal.

A lot more can be told about doing brain games with homemade puzzles. But with these guidelines you can make a start. Don't forget... it's about having quality time and enjoying the process. The possibilities are endless if you listen to your animal and observe what he or she needs.

Have fun!