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Indoor Scent Games for Dogs

By [Sassafra Lowrey, CTDI](#)
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Key Points

- Dogs experience much of the world around them through their sense of smell.
- Scent games allow dogs to channel their love of sniffing while also enriching their minds.
- Nose-based games are a great way to keep your dog mentally stimulated indoors.



[scent work, games, toys, puzzles](#)

Dogs experience much of the world around them through their sense of smell. On walks, and at home, our dogs constantly take in information with their noses that humans never even notice. [Scent games](#) allow dogs to channel their love of [sniffing](#) while enriching their minds.

The aim of these games is to teach our dogs how to tell us what they smell. Also, for us to learn to read our dogs and trust they are correct. Some scent games can even be played in small indoor spaces like a living room. When you find yourself stuck inside with your dog, games are a great way to keep them [mentally stimulated](#).

Getting Started With Scent Games

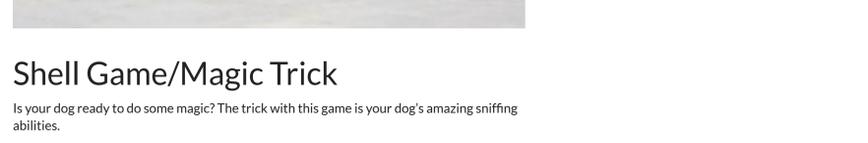
Scent games are fun for dogs of any age, including puppies and older dogs. In everyday life, we often [hurry our dogs along](#) when they stop to sniff. But in these games, we want them to understand that sniffing is encouraged. An easy way to introduce your dog to scent games is to set up a search for something immediately motivating for most dogs — food.

Muffin Tin Puzzles

This is a fun introductory [scent game](#) that requires only a few items which you might already own. All you need is an empty [muffin tin](#), [12 tennis balls](#), and some [smelly dog treats](#) that they love.

- Put treats into a few of the muffin tin holes and cover them with tennis balls.
- Next, put tennis balls into all of the other empty muffin tin holes.
- Give the "puzzle" to your dog and let them explore by moving the balls to find the treats hidden underneath.

Each time you play, change the location of the treats so your dog needs to use their nose to find the treats.



Shell Game/Magic Trick

Is your dog ready to do some magic? The trick with this game is your dog's amazing sniffing abilities.

- Grab three cups. For small dogs, you can use paper cups, but with larger dogs, you might want something a little more substantial like plastic cups or flowerpots.
- Start with one cup and put a treat under it while your dog is watching. When your dog noses at the cup or paws at it, praise and lift the cup to let your dog get the treat.
- After a few repetitions, bring in a second cup, but don't put anything under it. Show your dog that you are putting a treat under one cup with the empty cup next to it. When your dog sniffs or paws at the cup with the treat under it, praise and lift the cup to allow your dog to get the treat.

If your dog paws at the empty cup, lift it and show them there isn't anything there. Then, lift the cup with the treat and show your pup, but don't allow them to get the treat. Put the cup back down and repeat, praising your dog as they select the right cup.

The better your dog gets, the more cups you can add in. Start moving the cups around like a magician to clearly demonstrate that your dog is using their nose to find the treats, not just memorizing the location.

Box Search

For this game, you'll need to gather several empty boxes. Clean boxes leftover from deliveries work well.

- While your dog is in another room, put the empty boxes out on the floor.
- In one (or several) boxes, put treats.
- Bring your dog into the room with the boxes and encourage them to search. When your dog finds a treat in a box, praise and let your pup eat the treat.
- When your dog has found all the hidden treats, come in with another treat and lure your dog out of the search area by keeping their nose on the treat in your hand. Praise your dog and give the treat that you used to lure them away with. This helps to build your dog's understanding that it is a game you are playing together. It will also keep them from continuing to search and getting frustrated by not being able to find more treats.

Try Scent as a Sport

If you and your dog are enjoying scent games, you can start to introduce them to finding scents other than food. If you have an interest in eventually competing in the sport of [AKC Scent Work](#), it makes sense to start your dog on [birch essential oil](#), because that is the scent dogs must search for at the Novice level. At more advanced levels of competition, your dog will be searching for birch, [anise](#), [clove](#), and/or [cypress](#). If you don't want to compete in Scent Work, you can train your dog to find and alert to any scent of your choice.

- To introduce your dog to a scent, take whatever oil you choose, put a few drops of it onto a cotton swab and put it into a glass jar. [Small canning jars](#) work well because they are very inexpensive and easy to purchase.
- Have the jar in one hand and treats in the other. When your dog sniffs/noses at the jar with the scent, praise and bring your treat over next to the jar and treat. In this way, you are helping to make the connection for your dog that you are rewarding at the source of the scent. Now, you can introduce a verbal cue like "search."
- Once your dog is consistently nose-bumping the jar of scent in your hand, you can move the jar to the floor. Ask your dog to "search," and when they bump the jar with their nose, praise and reward with treats next to the jar. This helps reinforce the reward being connected to the scent.
- When your dog is consistently alerting to the jar of scent, you can begin to create simple hides in boxes like the above box game.

Added Challenges

For an extra challenge, ask a friend or family member to hide the scent for you while you and your dog are out of the room. This means that you won't know where the scent is, and you will have to trust your dog completely to tell you where they find scent. You can also train in different areas of your home like your bedroom, living room, kitchen, and garage. Different rooms will provide different levels of distractions and competing scents for your dog as they search for the odor.

Learning to play scent-based games and puzzles with your dog is a great way to keep busy when you're stuck indoors. It also can be useful foundation training that can support you with other sports. If your dog is having fun using their nose, you might want to explore sports like [Barn Hunt](#) or [Scent Work](#). Dogs love to sniff, so finding ways to channel and encourage their natural desire to explore with their nose is a great way to stimulate your pup's mind — and build a stronger relationship with them.

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