



What your dog really wants for Christmas

Forget toys and clothes; here are the five presents your dog really wants this festive season. **Tim Falk** reports.

A little extra playtime is a gift your dog won't forget.



More walks and better health are the best gifts you can give your pet.

1. QUALITY TIME — AND MORE OF IT

"I want to do more with my dog but I just don't have enough time." Have you ever found yourself thinking or even saying these words?

If the answer is yes, you're not alone. In this increasingly busy modern world, where there never seems to be enough minutes in the day, finding time to spend with your dog by your side isn't always an easy thing.

And that's a real shame, because dogs thrive on interaction with their owners. "Dogs that receive love and attention are happier, just like people," explains Sandra Sullivan from Western Suburbs Dog Training Club in Sydney.

"Stray dogs [and] dogs in pounds, large kennels, laboratories and puppy farms aren't as happy as dogs in a home where they receive love and attention. Just like people, that helps them to grow physically and mentally.

"The 'backyard dog' who is just fed and not trained, walked, talked to and played with will not develop into the great companion that most owners want."

So how can you start giving your dog more of your time? One easy way is with

a little extra training — all it takes to train your dog is a few minutes a day.

"You can use TV ad breaks, the time it takes for websites to download, for shows to stream, for water to boil for a cup of coffee, to run through the basics of come, stay, sit, drop and stand," says Sandra.

"Training your dog using these little opportunities every day is a great way of keeping up your dog's training — making life interesting for your dog and building your relationship with your dog. You don't need equipment; just you, your dog and some delicious treats."

Katie Catherwood from Heads & Tails Pet Care Services says the most time-effective way to ensure you meet your dog's needs is to integrate them into your own lifestyle wherever possible.

"If you can't create extra space within your busy schedule to spend time with your dog, try to modify your plans so that they are 'dog friendly' and your pooch can be included." She suggests:

- Trading in your gym/workout sessions for exercise time with your dog
- If you're meeting a friend for coffee, visit a dog-friendly cafe
- Walk the kids to/from school and take your dog with you

Are you unsure what to get your dog this Christmas? Have you already sorted gifts for everyone else but are still tossing up whether to get your pooch a new toy, a stylish new outfit or maybe a personalised food dish?

Rather than bombarding him with more material possessions this Christmas, have you considered giving your furry friend what he *really* wants? Sure, toys and trinkets are great and can provide plenty of fun, but they probably wouldn't be right at the top of your dog's list of all the things he absolutely, desperately, completely would love to receive from you.

Here are the five gifts your dog would love to unwrap this Christmas.

Your pet would love to spend more time with you this season.



- Book pet-friendly accommodation for some of your holidays
- Introduce Bring Your Dog to Work Day(s) at your workplace
- Get the kids involved in some dog-friendly activities such as agility or flyball
- Reduce your screen time at home and cuddle up to Fido on the couch!

"Above all, be organised about how you spend your time and make sure your priorities are in check," she says. "Remember, your decision to become a dog owner always included the responsibility (and joy!) of dedicating a

certain amount of time and energy to your four-legged friend."

2. AN ACTIVE APPROACH

How would you like to be stuck in your backyard for hours on end with no one to talk to and nothing to do? Life would be pretty boring indeed, so it's no wonder so many backyard pets are forced to find ways to make their own fun – like digging up the garden, tearing up their bedding and pulling clothes off the line.

Relieve your dog's boredom and give him the ongoing gift of regular exercise. "Not only do dogs need that

walk every day to stay fit and healthy, they also need to use their brains," Sandra says. "Mental stimulation is important to relieve stress, get rid of excess energy and tire the dog out."

Fetching, playing hide and seek and searching for a toy or food are all wonderful physical and mental exercises, she explains. "Giving your dog mental stimulation, such as teaching them to use a puzzle toy and taking them out for physical exercise, builds a great relationship between you and your dog."

Then there are the physical benefits regular exercise can have for your pooch.

GAME TIME!

Searching for ideas of some great playtime activities you can enjoy with your dog? Katie recommends the following games.

- **Find It:** Teach your dog to find a hidden toy in your house. Your first hiding spot needs to be easy, such as placing the toy underneath a towel while the dog is watching. "As your dog begins to understand the game, you can make the hiding places harder," she says.
- **Hide & Seek:** Teach your dog to find you in your house or backyard, by hiding and calling his/her name. Start with an obvious hiding spot and make it harder as you go. Make sure you give a huge reward when they find you.
- **Agility:** An impromptu agility course is a fun way to play with your dog! You can improvise using the equipment at your local park or you can build a home agility course extremely cheaply, if not for free.
- **Fetch:** "The original and arguably the best," Katie says. "Teach your dog to retrieve a thrown ball or toy. Some people get frustrated when their dog doesn't naturally do this. It is a learned skill and requires patience. The key in teaching fetch (or any new trick) is in making it so the dog can't fail. Remember to praise for each step closer your dog comes to picking up and retrieving the toy. Any progress is excellent and should be celebrated."

According to Katie, exercise keeps the body healthy and helps it to thrive. "Moving the body is vital to many basic functions, such as pumping blood and circulating oxygen," she says. "It also assists in keeping the digestive system functioning properly."

3. A LITTLE UNDERSTANDING

Do you ever get the feeling that you and your dog are speaking different languages? Does it feel like he's from Mars and you're from Venus – or something like that?

Understanding what your dog is trying to tell you is important for every dog owner, but sometimes deciphering your dog's efforts at communicating can be easier said than done.

"There are a lot of misconceptions around dogs' body language and dog owners can always benefit from getting to know their dogs better, no matter how well versed they think they may be," Katie says.

"We frequently encounter dog owners who mistake anxiety for excitement, uncertainty for defiance, and aggression for play (and vice versa)."

So, what can you do to better understand your dog and what he's thinking? First, spend lots of time with your dog (and other dogs) in varied situations, paying close attention to changes in behaviour and appearance. Second, don't be afraid to ask a force-free trainer or animal behaviourist for help understanding and training your dog.

Sandra says dogs "talk" to us through their body language and learning about your own dog's body language is fascinating. "You start to notice your

dog's personality and start to understand what they are saying. It's also a safety feature for you and your dog as you can learn when and where your dog may be uncomfortable and adjust the situation to help," she says.

4. CLARITY & CONSISTENCY

We all have the best of intentions when it comes to training our dogs and rewarding desired behaviour, but sometimes those good intentions can fall by the wayside.

There are plenty of common examples that many dog owners will be able to relate to. For instance, you may have established a rule that your dog is not allowed on the bed, but it's a freezing cold night and he just looks so warm and cuddly – what's the harm in letting him sleep in bed with you for just one night?

Alternatively, maybe you have trouble ensuring consistent rules and training methods across the entire family. Mum and the kids know to keep Rover's treats to a minimum but Dad's a sucker for those "puppy-dog eyes" and can't help but spoil him with a whole lot of unnecessary snacks.

Unfortunately, a lack of uniformity can cause problems. "Dogs love consistency and structure. Any deviation results in a confused dog who starts to make his own rules as the owner is not being clear with what he wants," Sandra says.

"Everyone who lives with the dog should use the same training methods and commands and the family should agree on the behaviour they want to encourage and so reward, and the behaviour that will not be rewarded. It's not much use if someone is unhappy with a dog jumping up but others encourage this habit."

Katie says that rules and structure are absolutely vital to raising a well-balanced dog, but reminds owners to remember not to confuse enforcing rules with being mean and nasty.

"Discipline and structure does not require raising one's voice or hand; and in fact, rules work best when enforced with kindness, as this fosters trust," Katie explains.

"Our number-one tip to dog owners wanting to create more rules and structure for their dogs would be to focus on what you *want* your dog to do, not what you *don't* want them to do. Your rules should focus around creating opportunities for your dog to succeed, not around disciplining your dog for bad behaviour," she says.

5. PLAYTIME

The last item on your dog's Christmas wish list is some extra playtime, which can have a whole lot of important benefits for your pooch.

"When dog owners engage in play with their dogs they are actively bonding and strengthening their relationship," Katie says. "A by-product of playtime is that it is also often educational. Dogs are curious creatures who are always seeking to learn and understand new things."

Remember with any new game that it's important to make it easy and achievable for your dog in the beginning and you should always stick to positive, rewards-based training methods. If you keep it fun and set your dog up for success, the mental and physical benefits of regular playtime make it the perfect Christmas present for your much-loved pet. **DL**