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# New Tricks for Old Dogs

Think you can't teach your old dog new tricks? Think again. As **Tim Falk** discovers, age is no barrier to learning for our senior canine companions.

**Y**ou can't teach an old dog new tricks. It's a cliché we've all heard plenty of times before, but is there any truth to it? Happily, for our canine friends, the answer is an emphatic no.

"This old saying is not true at all and has even been scientifically disproven," says Katie Catherwood from Heads and Tails Pet Care Services. "Dogs can learn new tricks at

any age. In fact, it is very beneficial to keep teaching them new things as they get older. It is just important to bear in mind that the same patience, consistency and reward is required when training your older dog as it is when working with a puppy."

Chiara Perri from Point Cook Dog Training says that just because a dog is going grey and slowing down a bit, it doesn't mean he or she has lost his or her

capacity to learn. "You can train a dog right up to old age," she says. "As long as the dog still wants to interact with you and has the ability to see, hear or smell you, then training can still be part of your routine. In fact, I have often had 10-year-old dogs coming to classes just to learn something new. It may take a little longer to learn and it may require a bit more motivating, but they can certainly still learn."

The best time to train an old dog is before a meal.

"A dog that you mentally stimulate is more likely to sleep than try to stimulate itself by barking at every passing bird," Alisa says.

Dogs of all ages need a certain level of environmental stimulation in order to feel satisfied, and throughout most of their lives this stimulation is made up of both mental and physical challenges. Puppies are easily able to achieve a sense of enrichment as the world around them is completely new and exciting, while adult dogs often experience both mental and physical stimulation concurrently. A run in the park is also an act in exploration, socialisation, game-playing, recall practice and so on, Katie explains.

"Most senior dogs, however, experience a decline in physical ability at some point and a fair consequence of this may be shorter, less frequent outings. Unfortunately, this also greatly reduces access to the main source of mental stimulation and can leave a dog feeling anxious or depressed, particularly over the long-term," she says.

So if your pooch is less active than she used to be, it's very important to recreate the opportunity for mental stimulation in another, less physically demanding setting. This gives them a continued sense of purpose and fulfilment and can also improve their longevity.

## GIDGET THE GREAT

When 11-year-old Jack Russell Terrier Gidget was diagnosed with mast cell tumours a little over 12 months ago, owner Amanda Collins feared the worst. "We were advised that she might not recover from the cancer. It was a terribly anxious time but we just kept positive and put our full trust in her wonderful team of specialists," Amanda explains.

"We were very fortunate that after significant surgery, Gidget fully recovered and was declared free of cancer. Gidget is a little fighter and she loves life to the fullest, which encourages me to live by her 'little doggy' example."

Sensitive yet cheeky, Gidget is notorious for getting herself into wonderfully strange and entertaining situations. And despite the fact that she's not a young pup any more, Gidget is showing no signs of slowing down. "We walk Gidget daily and she loves it as much as she did when she was a pup. If we miss a walk, she gets very sad so we don't often miss one," Amanda says.

"A month ago we went on a beach holiday and Gidget pulled a muscle in her leg from chasing and eating ghost crabs. She had the time of her life, though. While other dog breeds ran along the beach, chasing one another, Gidget was in the dunes chasing these virtually invisible little crabs like a crazed terrier. It was a sight to behold."

Unfortunately, this adventurous pooch also ate a blue bottle, so it was off to the local vet where she was given a paste to line her stomach in case of any allergic reaction. "We joke that Gidget knows almost every vet stretching from the Gold Coast to the Sunshine Coast," Amanda says. "Most of our friends and family call for updates on Gidget, not us, as I think she often leads the most interesting life out of any of us."

And Gidget's life got even more interesting than usual recently when she was given the opportunity to get into showbiz through the Domino's Pizza franchise. "Gidget and I were asked to participate in a '360 video' by a friend in advertising," Amanda explains. "They wanted to highlight movement and provide the viewer with a front-row experience of people interacting with the new Domino's Robotic Unit that is set to deliver pizza.

"The video can be watched on your mobile or tablet device, and you can follow Gidget as she runs past the robot by moving your device around. The technology is incredible and they say it is the precursor to accessible virtual reality.

"We were cast as the fitness pair and I literally jumped at the opportunity for her to be involved. It was so much fun and Gidget was on her best behaviour on-set, running on the director's cue. It just goes to show that you can teach an old dog new tricks."

## THE IMPORTANCE OF LEARNING

We all know how important it is for our dogs to get regular exercise, but it's not only your pooch's body you need to exercise; exercising his mind has a wide range of benefits. "Mental stimulation is very important for keeping your dog's brain healthy as they age," explains Alisa Sannikova, animal behaviour scientist from Sydney dog walking and training service Perfect Dog. "A dog that has practice learning new things all the time has an advantage when it comes to dealing with new situations and experiences in life."

Doing a lot of thinking is also a great way to tire your dog out when you can't take them for a run, for example if their arthritic joints are too painful for running.

Despite the saying, old dogs  
can be taught new tricks.



## TOP TRICKS

So, what are some good tricks to teach an older dog? Aside from the basic “sit”, “drop” and “stay” commands, a fun and easy trick you can teach a senior dog is “shake”.

“This is best to do just before your dog’s meal time and in a room where there are no other distractions,” Katie says. “Start by getting a few small pieces of your dog’s favourite food to use as treats. Put one of the treats in the palm of your hand and gently close your fist around it so your dog can’t actually eat it, but can still smell and lick it. Allow them to do so and be patient.”

Eventually, most dogs will be determined enough to paw at your hand to try and retrieve the treat you have concealed. As soon as the paw touches your hand, release the treat to your dog and say “shake”, followed by lots of praise. For dogs who are more interested in toys than food, you could replace the treat in this trick with a new toy.

Another fun trick a senior dog can learn is how to look for a hidden toy and “find it”. The key here is to make it very simple at first, and then slightly harder each time thereafter. Start with your dog’s favourite

toy — show the toy to your dog and then go into a separate room and hide it in a very obvious place.

“Ask your dog to ‘find it’. If your dog needs a clue, you may even point at the toy. Most dogs understand this gesture and will take the hint,” Katie says. “When your dog does find the toy, it’s important to offer him lots of praise, no matter how much help you gave him. The more pleased you are with your dog’s efforts, the harder he’ll try next time.”

Alisa suggests trying to teach your older dog the following two tricks:

- **Crawl:** “Encourage your dog to follow a treat under a very low stool or your leg

while you sit down, so that your dog does a short crawl. Next, see if she’ll follow your hand without the treat in it and start saying the word ‘crawl’ at the same time as the behaviour is happening. Once your dog is confidently doing it, start slowly raising the prop and removing it,” she says.

- **Spin around:** “Hold a treat in front of her and then move it slowly in a circle so that she follows it. It’s a very easy trick to transition to just drawing a circle in the air with your finger above her body. A great idea to prevent your dog getting dizzy is to teach it twice: ‘spin’ in one direction and then ‘twist’ in the other.”

From this point on, the sky really is the limit. Just make sure that your dog is physically capable of doing what you ask and that you remember to stay patient and reward your pooch for doing the right thing.

## TRAINING YOUR DOG

When training an older dog, it’s very important to match the trick to your dog’s abilities. “For example, your adult dog might be refusing to learn to fetch your keys not because he’s stubborn, but because he has a toothache. And you’ll have a hard time teaching flashy jumping tricks to a senior citizen with arthritis,” says Alisa.

## STAYING SHARP

Providing mental stimulation for your dog doesn’t end with trick training. In fact, there’s plenty more you can do to give canine minds a workout, starting with scent work. Teaching your dog to

Hiding treats or toys for your older dog to sniff out can exercise their mind.



## CANINE HERO

Each year, the Sydney Royal Easter Show hands out plenty of awards and titles to dogs of all shapes and sizes. But in 2016, the show featured a new type of award to recognise the outstanding accomplishments of dogs: the Canine Heroes Awards.

The inaugural Companion Dog Award was open to any dog that “displayed in an exceptional way the human-animal bond” and you probably won’t be surprised to find out that it was taken home by a canine senior citizen.

When her owner got her electric wheelchair bogged in Sydney’s Centennial Park, 11-year-old Shetland Sheepdog Brook leapt into action. Although not trained as an assistance dog, Brook raced to get help from nearby picnickers, who helped move the wheelchair to solid ground.

For her quick thinking and initiative, Brook received her Canine Hero Award from Governor-General Sir Peter Cosgrove at the 2016 Royal Easter Show.

find objects through their sense of smell is a great way to provide stimulation and there are many workshops offered now targeting scent work.

“For the socially active dogs, visiting new places like the countryside, the beach, the markets, cafes, etc. can work wonders purely because it might be new with lots of smells and sights on hand,” Chiara says.

“For the dog that loves to be around people, signing up as a therapy dog can be wonderful because the dog is seeing new people and calmly working in a new environment without being too strenuous. And for the dog that loves other dogs, a new puppy can pep the senior up, giving it something new to think about and keep up with.”

Katie also has several suggestions on how to challenge ageing canine minds,

including using interactive puzzle toys at meal times. You could also offer your dog some toys that are suitable to his life stage – many toy manufacturers cater for the senior age range.

“If walking is too strenuous, try driving with your dog to the park and sitting together for a while. Even though your dog may not be very mobile, he will still enjoy engaging his senses in a different environment. You might even try a number of new places to keep you both interested,” she says.

“Maintain social interaction with other dogs, just taking care to ensure your dog’s friends aren’t too boisterous for his liking. Most importantly, talk to your dog. He might not answer back but he is always listening and, above all, he is your companion.” **DL**