

How Scent Detection Helps Nervous Dogs

By Carla Simon, BSc, MD, MBA

Does your dog suffer from behavioral issues like barking endlessly at the window at strange dogs, or stressing over strange noises? Scent detection is a great way to provide environmental enrichment and transform problematic dog behaviors. Many shy, fearful, reactive, and nervous dogs can benefit from scent detection, which helps channel the dog's natural drives and instincts and builds confidence. As the proverb says, **“A dog in a kennel barks at his fleas; a dog hunting does not notice them”**.

At first glance, you may think today's pet dogs have it made. They don't need to worry about finding food or a soft bed and they get lots of snuggles. The problem is that life as an indoor couch potato isn't what dogs are built for. Dogs evolved alongside humans, cooperatively hunting for our food.

Physically and behaviorally, dogs need daily mental and physical exercise to be happy and healthy. Many dogs are full of energy with nothing productive to do. They have nothing but free time for barking anxiously at the outside world or making up games to entertain themselves. One of the best ways to meet those hard-wired needs in a more positive way is to provide frequent opportunities for scent detection.



*A 5-week-old Brittany puppy tentatively sniffing a stick.
Photo by Hunter's Heart Kennels, © 2001.*

Wild dogs may spend as much as 70% of their time searching for food, which relies heavily on olfaction. Most hunts are unsuccessful. Wild dogs sniff, search and hunt many times in order to succeed in catching one meal. They practice catching prey in play: sniffing, stalking, chasing, pouncing, and shaking. Searching and hunting expend energy, keeping the dog in fit condition, as well as improving problem solving skills. By watching elders model hunting behaviors, they learn to improve their skills. Hunting as a team requires teamwork, which strengthens bonds between hunting partners.

In stark contrast, many pet dogs spend 8 hours a day waiting for their owner to come home from work. When the tired owner arrives, she doesn't have much time or energy for her dogs as she'd like. Someone needs to make dinner. But while the owner's busy cooking on the stove, the dog has little to do. The dog's normal need for movement and stimulation are frequently unmet. Understimulated dogs frequently exhibit problematic behaviors: from destructing objects around the house, to digging, barking, escaping, pacing and other compulsive behaviors (like chewing wire crates or walls).

It's not uncommon for new dog owners to complain about their dog's "obsessive sniffing". But don't forget that sniffing is normal behavior for a dog, especially for hunting breeds. Even if you're not a hunter, sniffing is an important part of life for dogs. Enrichment through scent detection can make a huge difference for dogs with behavioral issues. Scent detection provides an outlet, acting as an "off switch". After meeting the dog's need for mental and physical exercise, most dogs are quieter, more relaxed, and better able to settle down at home.

Environmental enrichment (aka behavioral enrichment) means enhancing an animal's surroundings and lifestyle so he has access to opportunities to learn new things and engage in instinctive behaviors such as searching and sniffing. Not surprisingly, studies of zoo animals show how enrichment reduces compulsive behaviors and self injury, improves learning and memory, reduces aggression and fear, and decreases reactivity to environmental stressors. Similar results are described at humane societies, rescue organizations and kennels.

The problem behaviors that plague many nervous and high-strung dogs frequently decrease or disappear once their needs are addressed through scent detection. Dogs who are fully engaged in scent detection appears focussed, as they sniff and move to their heart's content. They become less nervous, less bored and frustrated, and pleasantly tired. Environmental enrichment even attenuates cognitive decline normally associated with aging.

Luckily, the vast majority of dogs enjoy scent detection. Puppies can start at 5 weeks, and it doesn't need to be complicated. Start by sprinkling your dog's food on your front lawn. Just point at the food with your hand (a gesture most dogs understand). Then you should be able to sit there and drink your coffee while he finds all the treats. With repetitions, he'll improve his scenting ability so you can hide rewards over a larger area.

All dogs who enjoy sniffing and like rewards can learn scent detection. Since there's never any dog-dog interaction, it's safe for reactive dogs to participate. Scenting helps build confidence in nervous and high-strung dogs, builds your relationship and your bond. Dogs with physical challenges with exercise restrictions (such as agility) can continue to enjoy low-impact scent detection into old age. You can do scent detection at home, outside and on your travels. It's inexpensive and requires nominal equipment and space. Best of all, it's fun for both humans and dogs. Whatever your level or goals, we'll show you how to train your sniffer dog and enjoy every training session.

Dr. Carla Simon has bred and trained hunting dogs for Hunter's Heart Reg'd since 1999 and currently teaches scent detection at Kayenna Kennels in Calgary, Canada. From bed bugs to human remains, from narcotics to nosework, her motivational training has helped hundreds of scent dogs around the world to reach their potential. Follow her blog at <http://nosework.huntersheart.com>.