



Guide Dogs for the Blind Puppy Raising Department

Fun Canine Conditioning Games for Guide Dog Puppies 12 Months & Older

We are excited to introduce a new program to puppy raising involving canine conditioning and fitness games. These games will give older puppies and raisers more activities to practice at home and will provide opportunities for engagement that should help exercise puppies' bodies and minds!

Participation in this program is not mandatory as we recognize that for some of our volunteers, raising a puppy and negotiating these challenging times is more than enough. We are asking however, that for co-raised puppies participating in this program, communication and consistency between homes be maintained to avoid risking injury to the puppy.

We suggest tracking and logging the progression of each puppy to ensure all parties are carefully following the guidelines. We also require raisers to document in the puppy's monthly report which exercises are currently being worked on. This will enable us to track the success of the program when the puppies return to campus and the vet department conducts in-for-training examinations.

Below are directions on how to build up the exercises gradually and minimum and maximum goals (number of sets, reps etc.). There is a minimum amount of time that must be committed to so that the puppy achieves/maintains a level of fitness. Sporadically doing the exercises and/or not building them up gradually, could result in injury. Likewise, doing too much at once with the dog, or overstressing the musculoskeletal system, could be harmful. Raisers are asked to stay within the guidelines below.

Introduction to Canine Conditioning Games for GDB Puppies from Our Veterinary Team

The following exercises are meant to be explored in puppies at least 12 months of age. This allows younger puppies a chance to first solidify their foundation of basic training and protects them from potential overuse injuries.

All the exercises selected below need minimal equipment and are easy to teach. They are also low risk for injury and will not interfere with formal guide training.

These exercises are divided into categories: stretching, core strengthening and front and rear leg strengthening. Many have the additional benefit of enhancing body positional awareness.

Stretching is crucial for prevention of injury in any working dog and promotes better range of motion and flexibility. Stretching helps warm up muscles by enhancing blood flow and over time it also increases muscle strength, particularly of smaller muscle groups that are not as often used in everyday activities. These smaller muscle groups (such as in the neck, flanks, groin and lower back) are important in body stabilization and they enhance overall training safety. This is particularly important upon return to campus, specifically for safe loading in and out of training vans as well as to prevent twisting injuries of the back and spine.

Core and leg strengthening are a major aspect of overall canine health and longevity. A strong dog is less likely to suffer from injuries, both acute injuries such as muscle sprains and tears, or chronic injuries such as cumulative arthritis and degenerative joint disease. Reducing acute injuries is particularly important for our dogs once they return to campus for formal training, to increase their efficiency and success through GDB's rigorous training program. Reducing chronic injuries is essential for maintaining a safe and comfortable working life as each dog ages, allowing for a longer and more strongly bonded working relationship in our client-guide teams. Core strengthening also enhances balance and flexibility which is crucial in our dogs, allowing for better and safer navigation in our client-guide teams (such as around escalators, trains, unexpected terrain shifts, etc.).

Lastly, enhancing body positional awareness is vital to the success of a working client-grad team. Dogs do not have natural rear end awareness and can often injure themselves on stairs, shifting or slippery terrain, narrow walkways, and jumping in and out of vehicles. Bringing positional awareness to the forefront of a dog's active and engaged mind helps improve balance and therefore safety.

General Information

Training the Body vs. Training the Mind

Unlike our other training games, the goal for this program is not a dog that performs a specific behavior on a verbal cue; none of the exercises have an associated verbal cue. The goal of these exercises is to build up the dog's strength and flexibility – to work on the dog's body. The dogs will be lured/pezzed during the exercise to ensure that the handler has maximum control over the speed at which the exercise is performed, and to ensure proper form (the manner in which the dog does the exercise). It is important to move slowly and deliberately through the exercises for maximum therapeutic benefit and minimize risk of injury. These exercises are not tricks that a dog performs on cue, but are beneficial conditioning exercises.

Warming Up

Taking the dog for a short walk (minimum of a couple of minutes) before doing the exercises will warm up its muscles and help prevent injury.

Reps and Sets

Reps – how many of that exercise are performed consecutively. Sets – how many times the recommended number of reps are repeated. In the instructions for the individual exercises, it may say 3 reps x 2 sets. So, this would mean we have the dog perform the exercise three times, give a break, then another three times. The break may just be 5 - 10 seconds of rest or more, depending on the exercise. Playing, petting and other forms of secondary reinforcement are encouraged between sets.

Amount to Work the Dog

Start with 3-5 exercises 4-5 times per week and spend about 10-15 min per session (not each exercise!) and watch for signs of fatigue. Pay attention to the instructions for each exercise on how to build up. Every dog will be different, and some will need to go more slowly than others. The *average* goal would be to build up about 20% per week, always watching for signs of fatigue.

Signs of Fatigue

Easy to misinterpret – watch carefully for these subtle signs!

- not able to hold correct position or movement when correct position/movement was previously achieved
- refusal or avoiding an exercise
- panting excessively

- lip licking
- wandering away - lack of focus
- yawning

Stretching

- Promotes better range of motion/suppleness and flexibility
- Enhances circulation and more oxygen to muscles
- Always have the dog do some stretching before doing any strengthening exercises

Be sure to warm the dog up (see above) before stretching. Stretching should be done slowly with close observation of the dog's response. Stretches should begin with a small range of motion, and the range increased gradually. If the dog hesitates to stretch for the food, just reward at the level at which it is comfortable for a few sessions before asking for a bit more. Start with the dog holding the position for 1-2 seconds and over a period of weeks, work up to 12-15 seconds per pose. Just going once through the series is sufficient each session.

- Stretches
 - See video link: <https://youtu.be/tW28nsusdR8>
 - Nose to sternum
 - Stretch left – nose to shoulder then nose to hip
 - Stretch right – nose to shoulder then nose to hip
- Bow
 - See video link: https://youtu.be/hfUtKX_cAGM
 - Build up the amount of time the dog is asked to hold the position a few seconds at a time over multiple sessions
 - The goal is to have the dog hold the bow position for about 15 seconds and can be done twice

Core Strengthening Exercises

- Strengthen the back muscles which in turn supports the entire body
- Stabilizes the lower back promoting smooth function of the pelvis/hips/lower back
- Maintains balance
- Enhances Flexibility
- Decreases susceptibility to soft tissue injury

Everyday Activities That Help with Core Strength

- Walking on uneven surfaces
- Walking up and down hills (walking figure 8s especially!)
- Walking slowly on leash up and down stairs

Always do a warmup walk and some stretches before commencing any strengthening exercises!

Canine Conditioning Games

- Position Changes – Stand to Sit to Stand
 - See video link: <https://youtu.be/LZAkweO93M>
 - Proper form is essential for this exercise to have fitness benefits! Front feet should stay still (Paw Pad helps) and the dog should do a “kick back” stand and a “tuck” sit to engage the core
 - The goal is to do 5 reps, give the dog a break for five to thirty seconds and then do another 5 reps building up to 3 sets total after a couple of weeks of work
- Position Changes – Stand to Down to Stand
 - See video link: <https://youtu.be/eommwmbQbXc>

- Proper form is essential for this exercise to have fitness benefits! Front feet should stay still, and the dog should do a “kick back” stand and a “sphinx” down to engage core
- The goal is to do 5 reps, give the dog a break for five to thirty seconds and then do another 5 reps building up to 3 sets total after a couple of weeks of work
- Crawl
 - See video link: <https://youtu.be/CLsITSqzHIk>
 - Start with the dog following the lure under one chair
 - Pezz continuously to keep the dog engaged (challenging exercise)
 - Add a second chair or similar object after a week or two of work
 - The goal is to eventually have the dog crawl about three times its body length no more than twice each session
- Rollover
 - See video link: <https://youtu.be/WYb90-SLv1c>
 - Challenging to teach some dogs and takes a lot of core strength
 - Be patient and reward for tiny increments; use high value food at first if necessary
 - May take numerous sessions and some gentle physical assistance for the dog to get the idea
 - Roll both ways to keep the dog balanced – one way easier than the other
 - Slowly build up number of rolls over several weeks
 - Once the dog understands how to rollover the goal for each session is three “rolls” in each direction.
- Sit Pretty
 - See video link: <https://youtu.be/33FYdHusO0k>
 - Dogs with a sloppy sit are not going to be able to do this – work on the sit first (see video)
 - This is a real workout for the dog’s core and takes a lot of strength to do
 - May take two to four weeks to get the dog to actually sit up for more than a few seconds
 - Start with pop ups and/or physical assistance
 - Build up slowly to prevent injury! Practice no more than every other day to give the muscles a rest in between
 - The goal is for the dog to hold the position for 15 seconds, take a 5 second break then repeat x 3 reps

Rear End Awareness and Strengthening

Dogs do not have natural rear end awareness. Lack of this awareness can cause dogs to be out of balance when undertaking certain training skills leading to possible injury. Also, a strong rear propels the dog when climbing stairs, jumping into vehicles etc.

Everyday Activities That Help with Strengthening the Rear

- Walking on uneven surfaces
- Walking up and down hills (walking figure 8s especially!)
- Walking *slowly* on-leash up stairs

Always do a warmup walk and some stretches before commencing any strengthening exercises!

Canine Conditioning Games

- Rear Foot Target
 - See video link: <https://youtu.be/UrVLBI5ndG4>
 - Prerequisite to Pivot on Rear (see below)
 - One method of teaching Back Up (see below)
 - Use barriers and environmental guides to help the dog understand
 - Luring/pezzing and spatial pressure to guide rear legs onto pad
 - Can be expanded to more advanced conditioning exercises later
- Back Up (also good for balance and proprioception)

- See video link: https://youtu.be/Q3P2iP0_mfY
- Start with just a few steps backward and build up over several sessions
- Slowly and straight for maximum conditioning
- Collar cues are a simple way to have the dog back up
- Barriers and environmental guides are useful to help the dog understand and stay straight
- Teaching the Rear Foot Target is one way to get the dog to back up and can be used in other exercises
- Goal is backing up in a straight line 10- 20 feet.
- Changes of surface and even slight incline can be added for extra challenge!

- Pivot on Front
 - See video link: https://youtu.be/viiE7eFWE_w
 - Start with a few steps
 - If this makes you dizzy do half circles!
 - Dogs will go more easily one way than the other
 - Build up to three circles *in each direction* within five sessions or so
 - Goal is three circles in one direction, then three circles in the other direction x 3 sets (give dog break in between sets)

- Side Stepping (both front and rear move laterally)
 - See video link: https://youtu.be/QK_8zpuXAZ0
 - Use collar cues to move dog in each direction
 - Doing this with a wall close behind will help dog move laterally
 - Start with just a few steps in each direction. Build up a few steps at a time
 - Goal - ten steps in direction x 2 sets

- Position Changes – All (see above)
 - The position changes are great rear end strengtheners as well as core strengtheners

Front Leg Strengthening

Everyday Activities That Help with Strengthening the Front

- Walking on uneven surfaces
- Walking up and down hills (walking figure 8s especially!)
- Walking slowly on leash downstairs

Always do a warmup walk and some stretches before commencing any strengthening exercises!

Canine Conditioning Games

- Pivot on Rear

A prerequisite to this exercise is the dog being comfortable with finding a rear foot target and standing with its rear feet on the target. See the video “Rear Foot Target” and work through that before attempting Pivoting on the Rear.

 - See video link: <https://youtu.be/zmSMXagC4bs>
 - Start with a few steps
 - If this makes you dizzy do half circles!
 - Build up to three circles in each direction within five sessions or so
 - Goal is three circles in one direction, then three circles in the other direction x 3 sets (give dog break in between sets)

Although the purpose of introducing these exercises into Puppy Raising is serious, we also want the program to be enjoyable for dog and raiser alike! Remember to use lots of praise and food rewards and keep the sessions lighthearted and fun! Please check with your leader should you have any questions.