

Spend Quality Time with Your Dog

5 simple ways to spend more quality time with your dog.

Susan McCullough

Down the street from me lives a young Labrador Retriever whose plight breaks my heart every time I see him. He's not mistreated, at least not in an obvious way. He's just always alone. Day after day, he stays outdoors in his fenced yard, with no one for company. From his yard, he barks at all who pass by as though he were asking for someone — anyone — to pay attention to him.

The dog's owner is a busy guy. He's got a full-time job, a house to maintain, and all the other tasks to perform that go with life today. I sympathize: 21st century life can be chaotic for anyone. But we can make time for our dogs without exerting very much effort or spending a lot of extra time. Here are some ways to do just that.

Take her along. Whether running errands, picking the kids up from school, or stopping by your office, including your dog can be a hassle-free way to give her attention and stimulation. "For adult dogs whose owners' lifestyles primarily revolve around being home, at soccer games, and ferrying the kids to school, having the dog participate in these activities can meet much of her social needs," says Alice Moon-Fanelli, Ph.D., certified applied animal behaviorist at the Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University.

Sleep with her. Experts agree that having your dog sleep in your bedroom, but not necessarily on your bed, can be a great way to spend extended time with your canine companion with no additional effort on your part. You sleep, she sleeps. What could be easier?

Find things you both like to do. Some activities you do for your own enjoyment are even more fun if your four-legged friend does them with you. Moon-Fanelli recommends spending some one-on-one time with your dog "in mutually enjoyable physical activities," such as swimming and hiking.

Try multi-tasking. Are you busy fixing lunch or preparing dinner while your dog hangs around? Use this opportunity to help her practice sit-stays and down-stays. Are you watching TV? Use that time to brush your best friend, too — or at least give her some cuddle-time.

Do some delegating. If you don't live alone, other family members can help out with dog care. For example, "when there are children in the household, they can become the designated walkers, exercisers, and players," notes Terry Curtis, DVM, veterinary behaviorist at the University of Florida in Gainesville. "It just spreads the interactions over more people."

That said, you do need to at least spend a little extra time with your dog if she's to become a happy member of your household and stay that way. Every dog needs training, exercise, and some one-on-one time with her people each day. A little creativity on your part can go a long way toward meeting those needs without putting much of a dent in your schedule.

Maybe I can find a way to explain that to my Lab-owning neighbor the next time I see him.

Award-winning writer Susan McCullough lives with her husband, daughter, and dog in Virginia.