

Food Puzzles: Key Mistakes To Avoid And Strategies To Help Your Dog Best Deal With Frustration

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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In [Shaped by Dog episode number 239](#), I was talking about frustration and the use of food puzzles. And I said, "Hey, if you would like to know how I strategically use food puzzles, leave a comment." And wow, many of you, I don't know, 50 or 60 of you left comments and said you wanted to know. So, here we are talking about the effective use of food puzzles and the biggest mistakes that people might do when they're using them.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. And you know, food puzzles, people think of them as enrichment for the dogs and they can be, but they can also not be very enriching, really. They can be a huge tool when training the dogs to deal with frustration. Now look, frustration's a natural part of dog training.

It would be great if we could minimize it, but honestly, I don't want to completely eliminate it because if a dog is never frustrated in our training, that means we're not human. So, let's agree with the fact that we for now are going to make mistakes in our training. If our dogs have a great coping strategy with frustration, they're not going to be bothered by it.

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So, I think food puzzles are a great way for dogs to learn coping strategies. And it really doesn't have anything to do with us. The way that I like to use food puzzles doesn't involve me being physically with the dog, prompting them. They're figuring things out on their own.

Now, what's the downside of having frustrated dogs? That frustration is going to end up with a dog, maybe just giving up. And if it's a food puzzle and they just say, "Oh, this is too hard. I'm going to walk away." That's not such a big deal when it's your dog training and they just give up and walk away.

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Yeah, that is a big deal because we want to have fun with our dog. We want our dogs to enjoy training. So, we want them giving up and walking away or leaving you to go find something more interesting, not be an option because you're so interesting as a dog trainer, right?

Yet another response to a frustrated dog can be their emotions escalate. And they escalate in a way that maybe they redirect on another family pet, and they start becoming a bully or a pest to that family pet. They might redirect on you and start mouthing at you or grabbing at your clothing.

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Obvious sign of frustration is dogs that bark during their training. Some less obvious is that they might scratch their ear. There is [podcast episode number 263](#), I go into great detail on your dog's responses to frustration, but just know just like us when we're frustrated, it's our emotions that get expressed in probably a not so positive way.

If you're frustrated at technology like me, I don't deal well with that. Frustration towards people, maybe you have a little bit better filter than the frustration towards technology, but it's not pleasant in either way.



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And so, with our dogs, we don't want them to escalate because frustration can turn to [reactivity or aggression](#). Unchecked frustration can lead to aggressive behaviors in your dog and definitely disruptive or unwanted behaviors.

So, the goal is not to eliminate the frustration, but to teach the dog or to have the dog adopt coping strategies and dealing with their frustration. So, for example, tonight I was planning the podcast and two of my dogs came to me because it's dog walking o'clock. We should be either going out to the building to train or going for a walk around the field.

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Now I wasn't leaving the desk when they wanted me to. So, one of the dogs grabbed a bone and just started chewing in a bed nearby. So that's them with a great coping mechanism. "Things aren't happening at the time when I want them to, I'm just going to chew on a bone." The other dog just laid beside me and gave me that 'it's dog walking o'clock' stare. I still ignored them.

Don't worry, once this is recorded, we are going to go do something fun. My personal theory, and it is a theory because I can't find reference to this in any journals or any scientific documentation. But my theory is that food puzzles or puzzles are a really important stepping stone in the strategies that I have to help my dog be okay with frustration. To have a really healthy way of dealing with frustration.

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Again, it's my theory. Maybe dogs would respond the same without that stepping stone, but I like to make it clear when I'm presenting actual scientific fact, scientific data, and when I'm presenting my observations as a 30-year professional in dog training.

And my observations are that effective and strategic use of food puzzles can lead to a dog coping better with frustration, not just in your training, but in everyday life. So, let's talk about the categories of food puzzles that I might use. There's like the easiest puzzle and that would be just a [slow feeder](#).

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Something that your dog has to lick to get the food out, or you can consider a stuffed [Toppl or Kong](#), something that you stuff food into. That could be a food puzzle. It's just easy, isn't it? They figure it out pretty quickly. "I just lick and pull my food out and I get my meal", or I get whatever it is that you're giving to them, and it's done.

Right. It's done. Once it's done, it's done. It's like a single use thing and it's over. Now, a second cousin to that would be what I call a slow dispensing food roller, where you would fill the toy. It's usually round or roundish. You fill this toy with food and the dog will use their nose or their paws to move it around and food will drop out one or two little bits at a time.

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So, it's something that takes longer. It's a little bit more engaging for the dog. They might move it around your house or the room or their pen or whatever they're in. So, it's a little bit more difficult for them to get all the food out.

And sometimes quite honestly, they get out enough that they get sleepy, and they lay down and go to sleep. Now, obviously an older dog isn't going to give up until all the food's out, but that's what I've observed with puppies with the slow rollings.



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We have our stuffed single use food dispensing toys and then our slow food dispensing rollers. Next up would be a easy food puzzle. Now there's lots of different makes of food puzzles. I use the [Nina Ottosson food puzzles](#) and that have varying degrees of difficulties.

The easy ones really just need a dog to maybe move with their nose to get an easy little piece of plastic off of a little hole where there's food in there. Some of them, even it's just like a piece of plastic that they slide across and the food's inside.

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So, those are the really easy food puzzles, and they can escalate up. Now, a second category would be the food shredding. I mean, you could call them a puzzle, but what I call [puppy bombs](#), where I take a toilet paper roll and I fix the end, put food in them and fix the other end. You can make that even more complex by stuffing or rolling some of the food in paper that you stuff into the toilet paper roll before you close the ends up.

So, the dog's shred and sniff their way through. I mean, it's really enriching for the dog because so many dogs just love to shred and they're still hunting for food. So, that's super fun. Now you can make that more complex by putting like paper in a box and putting food in that box and they have to like, open the box and shred the paper.

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That's going up higher and you're not going to do that like say with a wee puppy, they're just going to give up. You're going to teach them when you're frustrated, give up. So, you want to make sure that the puzzle you're using is appropriate for the puppy or the dog, or the stage and the age and the current level that you know that the dog will tolerate in their frustration.

What are some of the key warnings and mistakes people make is they go right to the hardest puzzle level, and you create a response you don't want from that puppy or dog. You don't want them to give up. You don't want them to be disinterested in these games. So, you're going to start really easy and it's better that the dog finish it fast than they give up and walk away.

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So, you're going to start with super easy puzzles. Number two mistake that I see people make is they're not stuffing or loading these food puzzles with intentional value levels. Meaning, when I'm first starting this with a young puppy, I'll put in really attractive food.

Generally, we have homemade treats that we'll use in these food puzzles, because then we can put super attractive ingredients in. And if you don't have a recipe book for homemade treats, just click the link you'll find in the show notes, and you can have [the recipe book](#) that we've put together. It doesn't have to be homemade, but if you are going to use commercial, please don't just buy like crap off the, read the labels, read the labels, be really intentional about what you're allowing your dog to eat.

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People aren't intentional with the value of the treat and the stage. So, as a dog gets onto this, you can mix in a little bit more boring.

You don't only use the highest and the best value when they're really into this game. You can go to like maybe 10 percent high value and the rest is moderate and possibly even some low value in there.



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Once they're into the game, they're going to eat everything. Before you begin with these food puzzles, you need to separate our [resource guarding dogs](#) or resource obsessed dogs. So, if you have a dog who can guard their puzzle, make sure that you put them away from the other dogs.

If you have a dog who likes to stare at other dogs that have a food puzzle, get them out of there because them staring has the potential to create a resource guarder with the dog that's trying to work through this puzzle.

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So, separate, unless you know for sure, like I know Swagger is not going to care about anybody with a food puzzle. Most of my dogs will walk by. Tater Salad, he is obsessed with them. So, he'll just stare at them hoping the dog will walk away. Separate those out so you don't have any current or future problems.

Be strategic. These toys are not just meant to be babysitters for your puppy. They're meant to serve a purpose. And the first purpose that I like them to solve is for that puppy to grow confidence by themselves, which means don't give them a food puzzle and stand around and just stare at them.

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Set up a video camera. I love to enjoy watching my dogs work through these puzzles. But I'm not going to stand there and stare at my puppy as they do it because one of the goals, one of the games within the games is I want my puppy to learn to be a little frustrated, but work through that frustration, but don't associate me with that frustration.

And while they're getting the fun of learning these coping strategies and working through this frustration, they're learning they're doing it and I'm not around. So, it helps with those puppies that potentially might become, have a little [separation anxiety](#). It helps with those puppies to finish their game and just curl up in a bed and chew on a bone or go to sleep.

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So, you want to put your food puzzle in if your puppy is in an ex-pen or close the door, if you're doing it with your dog in a room and then leave, let them figure it out without you around. Now, if this is the very first time you've ever given them one of those, I'm going to make sure that when I talk about strategies, it's a step-by-step strategy, and I'll talk about that after.

But be sure that you are strategic with how you're delivering it and where you are, and what level of puzzle you're giving your dog. Along with the strategy, is make sure that you are challenging your dog. If you only ever gave them the same thing, like a Kong every day, there's no challenge in that.

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There really is no difference to a dog of feeding them their meal in a Kong versus in a bowl. Yeah, you will get them slowing their eating down. So, for some of the larger breeds, that's a good benefit to feeding in a Kong or a Toppl or a slow feeder.

But you're not giving them any real frustration if you're doing that the same way every single day. You want to mix up the challenging. Variety is the spice of life, not just for us, but for our dogs as well. So, with the thoughts, the strategies, you want to increase challenge, mix up challenge once you get to a higher level.



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Please make sure that you're measuring the rations that are going into these puzzles so that you know, how much your puppy or your dog is supposed to eat. And you're not going to end up overfeeding your dog because they're getting so much from these puzzles.

I personally like to aim for 70 to 80 percent of the food that my puppies get every day is in the form of training with me. And the rest will be either from a bowl or from one of these puzzles.

So, I mix that up. But the vast majority of the rations that my puppies get come in the form of training. So, it's coming from my hand.

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Not all of it, some of it will go into a food puzzle or potentially even into their bowl. Pick up that food puzzle when the puppy is finished.

A lot of them, especially if you're using a puppy, they're going to start chewing on these and they're going to turn them into a mess. Now, how are you going to know when they're done?

You're not going to know, but you know, maybe 30 minutes or an hour, depending on how ferocious a chewer you have, you will figure out how long you leave the puppy with that toy or puzzle. Now, I do like to keep the video rolling and you can turn that into something that you can watch remotely on your phone.

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Just in case there is any kind of a choking hazard. You don't want anything untoward happening to that puppy. So, you can be like hiding if you don't have the remote capabilities that I have with the phone and the camera, especially when we're talking about puppies, you want to err on the side of safety.

Don't leave that puzzle with the puppy because they're just going to chew it. And again, there may be choking hazards depending on the size of your puppy. Wash the puzzle every day. So, if you're using a hard fix puzzle, wash it out.

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Now, if you're using like toilet paper rolls or shredding games, you're not going to be doing that. You don't have to wash that up. You just have to clean up all the paper all over your house. But using Kongs, using Toppls, using food puzzles, please wash those with warm water and soap.

Make sure that you're not leaving any opportunity for bacteria to come in because we don't want there to be anything bad happening because you happen to be using a food puzzle. Okay, there's all of the warnings. So, things that I've seen people do wrong.

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And now let's talk about the strategies that I recommend you use with these food puzzles. Okay, I told you about the different categories. I think Toppls, or stuffing Kongs, or lick mats, I think those things are great for all dogs.

I saw behavior chains with Tater Salad just because we used that. So, if you did nothing else, using a slow feeder for some dogs is going to help. With Tater Salad, it stopped his obsessive licking of furniture. He used to eat his food and then lick the furniture. And I'm sure it had something to do with his gut biome.



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Now I can't guarantee you that starting to use a slow feeder is what changed it. It could have just meant the day we started the slow feeder his gut biome was going to get magically better anyway. But I can just tell you that my observations, scientific study of one, were that, that behavior changed in Tater Salad.

So, and if you have dogs that eat super-fast, slow feeders, just you don't even have to change off of them. If you do nothing else, slow feeders are a really good thing for those dogs. And you know, maybe you're building in a little bit of coping with frustration because they're not as easy to get the food out as just eating from a bowl.

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So, that's level one. Great level to start with. Introducing a dog, you might just put a little bit in the bottom of like a Toppl, over a Kong because it's a bigger opening. So, it's easier for the puppy to figure out how to get their food out of there. Now you can get super creative with what you put in there.

I use my raw food, but I always like stick something like a, you know, a rabbit ear or a beaver roll that we can get here in Canada. That is just something in there that makes it a little bit more exciting. Put some fruit in there because we feed raw, there's vegetables in there that I'll put that, maybe put it in the fridge, maybe put it in the freezer, depending on what we're doing.

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But it's a great way to introduce a puppy to a little bit of frustration as they learn to eat out of one of those. Again, I see people that just do this routinely. If that's what you like, that's great. I think that mixing things up is better for all dogs. The next level of challenge, I'll take the easiest food puzzle, and you can see they're level zero, level one, the easiest one where the dog doesn't have to move many things.

And here's what I do. I take super high value treats, maybe, I don't know, a handful, six to ten of them, and I just scatter them on the top. And I might put one under one of the easier pieces. And if it's a piece that's displaceable that I can pick up, I'll take it up, I'll put a super high value food under it.

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And instead of putting it down in the puzzle, I'll put it sideways on the puzzle. So, it's so easy for the puppy to get the treat that's under it. So, there'll be some scattered on the top that the puppy just learns to eat off of the top of this, and there'll be one under one of those puzzle pieces.

And then the next time I use it, I might put a few more on top of that puzzle piece. And every time I go to a higher puzzle, I'll be sure to leave a few easy treats on the top just to get the puppy going and working through them. As I mentioned off the top, I don't sit there and help the dog, "Look, there's still some in here.", "Oh, there might be some more over here."

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I give them the puzzle, I let them interact with it, I go away. We help to build that confidence and their independence as I'm out of the room. I come back and I check how much is left in there. And that's going to tell me, are they ready for more?

And I don't go, "Oh, you clean this one out. You're getting a harder one next one." I probably will give them that same level puzzle. I don't know, four or five times in a row. So, they get really, really good at it. And then I'll go to a slightly more difficult puzzle.



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Now I might use one of those hide n' slide puzzles like Nina Ottosson's, but I might also mix it up with some of the shredding puzzles where I put the food in there because I just think that's great for the puppies or the dogs to be able to use their nose.

Every one of my dogs loves to shred a puppy bomb. It doesn't matter their age. They all love them. So, I will mix that up and put those in there. We're constantly growing the challenge. We're constantly telling the dog, 'You can be frustrated, but you keep working through this. If you're persistent, you'll get your reinforcement.'

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And remember, we put high level reinforcement in these puzzles. So, they want to work through them. And once you've got a dog that's working, you don't have to go all the way up to the top level, but to, you know, you've gone beyond level one or two that the dog is working through these puzzles.

Now you should also be doing games of choice that we teach at DogsThat. In Home School the Dog or Recallers or games of choice that you'll find right [on our YouTube channel](#).

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So, games like [Crate Games](#) and [ItsYerChoice](#) and [Hand Targets](#). Games where there might be some frustration, but all of those precursors of fun puppy puzzles or food puzzles have helped that dog to want to work that frustration to be more persistent.

Now, I'm not saying that Crate Games and ItsYerChoice and Hand Targets should be taught in a frustrating way. Ideally, there's very, very little frustration for the dogs because the steps are so clear that the way that you've introduced each step brings more confidence.

But occasionally, we'll get failure, but because of the great introduction to puzzles my theory is the dogs are more willing to work through that failure.

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Okay, that's my theory. Remember, our goal is creating confidence. I want you to look at your own training. Are you seeing any signs of frustration in your training? That's a different story. You need to go back and say, where do I need more clarity?

Add that to your training because ultimate goal is to always be growing or protecting our dog's confidence, right? I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.





Episode: #278

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Try These Homemade Dog Treats

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Learn How To Play Hand Targets

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Resources:

[Podcast Episode 239: Barking Dogs! How To Help Your Dog Be Quiet And Stop Annoying Barking](#)

[Podcast Episode 263: Breaking Down Dog Behavior Problems: Insights From The Top 10 Frustrations](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Reactive or Aggressive Dogs: Key Insights with Susan Garrett](#)

[Outward Hound Fun Feeder Slow Bowl, Slow Feeder Dog Bowl](#)

[West Paw Zogoflex Toppl Treat Dispensing Dog Toy Puzzle](#)

[KONG Classic Stuffable Dog Toy](#)

[YouTube Video: DIY Puppy Bombs: Easy & Affordable Enrichment Toy for Puppies](#)

[Recallers Tasty Treats Recipe eBook](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Resource Guarding In Dogs and Puppies with Susan Garrett](#)

[Podcast Episode 200: Solve Your Dog's Separation Anxiety With FRIDA: Expanding Calm With Functional Relaxation](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Dog Training Games with Susan Garrett](#)

[Nina Ottosson Food Puzzles](#)



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About Susan

A world-leading educator of dog trainers, Susan is also one of the most successful agility competitors of the last three decades. She has won multiple Gold Medals at National or World Championship events with every dog she has ever owned over the past 30 years. Susan was one of the very first dog trainers to share knowledge online when she opened her "Clicker Dogs" website many years ago. Susan has helped hundreds of thousands of people enjoy a great relationship with their dogs through her workshops and keynote speaking around the world, award winning books, DVDs, magazine articles, blog posts, podcasts, free dog training and dog agility video series, and online dog training programs.



A natural teacher and an entertaining speaker, Susan is world renowned for her dog training knowledge and practical application of that knowledge. Her understanding of how to apply science-based learning principles to both competitive and family pet dog training has been pivotal in changing how dogs are trained.

Susan is now helping many thousands of dog owners in 82 countries have the best relationship possible with their dogs. The real joy for her comes from bringing confidence to dogs and their owner through playful interactions and relationship building games that are grounded firmly in the science of how animals learn.



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