

The Puppy Hunt Game Guide

Building a confident, problem-solving puppy, one search at a time.

The puppy is nose-down under the kitchen table, tail going, working toward the piece of kibble that rolled there ten minutes ago. Nobody had to teach that.

Every puppy is born knowing how to hunt. What your puppy learns about hunting in the next few months is up to you.



Why hunt games?

I train detection dogs for a living, and my puppies play hunt games long before they ever learn a target odor. That isn't because every puppy needs to become a working dog. It's because hunting is one of the few activities that asks a young dog to think, to keep trying when the answer isn't obvious, and to feel good about solving the problem without help.

Here's why that matters: the puppy who learns early that searching pays off becomes the dog who handles new places, new surfaces and new challenges without falling apart. That's useful on a rubble pile, and it's just as useful at the vet, in a hotel lobby or on your living room couch.

What you're actually building

Confidence

Small wins, stacked session after session, until "I can figure this out" becomes the default.

Persistence

A puppy who keeps working a problem for a few more seconds instead of quitting or looking to you for the answer.

Engagement with you

You're the one who makes the game happen.
The game makes you worth paying attention to.

Environmental resilience

New rooms, new footing, new smells. Hunting gives your puppy a job to do while learning the world is manageable.

If you point, your puppy learns to watch you. If you wait, your puppy learns to use their nose.

Before you start: find out what your puppy will work for

The reward is the engine of the game, so spend a session or two just playing and watching. Try a few pieces of their regular food, a higher-value treat, a soft tug toy and a rolling ball. Notice which one gets their eyes, feet and mouth moving fastest. That's your starting reward. Some puppies are food first, some are toy first, and most change their minds as they grow. Keep watching.

- **Keep it short.** Three to five finds is a full session for a young puppy.
- **Quit while your puppy still wants more.** Ending on eagerness is how you get eagerness next time.
- **Pick one release cue** ("Find it!" works fine) and use it the same way every time.
- **Keep it safe.** Supervise, hide only things your puppy is allowed to eat or chew, and skip slippery floors and stairs early on.

Hunt games in five phases

Each phase builds on the one before it. Move forward when your puppy is winning easily, and step back without guilt when they aren't. Going back a phase isn't failure; it's good training.

1

The watched hide

Gently hold your puppy (or have a helper do it) while they watch you place the reward a few feet away, right out in the open. Give your cue and let go. When your puppy gets there, celebrate like they just found buried treasure.

Move on when: your puppy **charges straight to it** the moment you release

2

The disappearing hide

Your puppy still watches you walk away with the reward, but now you tuck it just out of sight: behind a chair leg, around a doorway, under the edge of a towel. They know it exists. Now they have to go find where it went.

Move on when: your puppy **searches without looking back** at you for help

3

The real hunt

Put your puppy behind a closed door or baby gate, hide the reward somewhere easy in a small room, then bring them in and give your cue. They don't know where it is anymore, so the nose has to do the work. Keep hides low and simple at first.

Move on when: your puppy **finds it quickly and happily** in most tries across two sessions

4

New places, new footing

Take the same easy game on the road: a different room, the yard, a friend's garage, a quiet corner of a park. Change the surface too: grass, gravel, tile, carpet, a rubber mat. Every time the location changes, make the hide *easier* again. New places are hard enough on their own.

Move on when: your puppy **hunts the same way** in a new spot as at home

5

Change one thing at a time

Now you get to grow the game. Add a little more distance, or put the hide a little higher, or tuck it inside a box, or search a slightly busier space. Pick *one* of those per session, not all of them. If your puppy struggles, you'll know exactly which change caused it.

The rule: **one new challenge** per session, and easy again anywhere new

Reading your puppy

The most valuable skill you can build during hunt games isn't your puppy's. It's yours. Watching how your puppy moves, breathes and responds when stuck will tell you more than any timeline ever could.

What you see	What it looks like	What to do
Engaged	Nose down, loose and busy body, working back and forth, bounces back quickly after a miss.	This is the sweet spot. Keep sessions here and end while your puppy is still in it.
Over the top	Frantic running, barking, grabbing at you, flying past the hide, can't settle between finds.	Make the hide easier, pause longer between turns, try a lower-value reward, shorten the session.
Checking out	Sniffing the ground but not searching, wandering off, staring at you, sitting down, yawning.	Go back a phase, raise the reward value, move somewhere quieter, and quit sooner next time.

When helping starts to hurt

Almost every mistake I see in puppy hunt games comes from a good place. We want our puppies to win, so we help. The trouble is that a puppy learns from whatever actually happens, not from what we meant.

Pointing or walking them to it

Your puppy learns the answer lives in your hand, not in their nose. Make the hide easier instead of helping.

Talking the whole time

Constant chatter competes with the problem your puppy is trying to solve. Cue once, then be quiet and watch.

Too hard, too fast

A string of failures teaches quitting. Keep success high, especially anywhere new.

Sessions that run long

The last find should be the most exciting, not the one your puppy dragged through. Stop early.

The same spot every time

Your puppy will learn to check the couch cushion, not to search. Move your hides around.

A boring payoff

The find is the best part. Party when your puppy gets there, and let them enjoy the reward right at the hide.

Your puppy doesn't need you to find it for them. They need you to set up a problem they can solve.

Your hunt game log

Writing it down is how you see progress you'd otherwise miss. A few words after each session is plenty.

Date	Location / surface	Phase	Finds	Reward used	What I noticed

TRY THIS TODAY

Hide your puppy's favorite toy or a few pieces of kibble somewhere easy in three different rooms (or the yard). Cue once, stay quiet, and let your puppy find it with no pointing and no helping. Celebrate big, and stop while they still want more. Then write down what changed from room to room.

About Robin

Robin Greubel has trained detection dogs since 2001 and holds a Master K9 Trainer credential through the Scandinavian Working Dog Institute. She serves as a subject matter expert on the Dogs and Sensors Consensus Body of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, and she raises purpose-bred Labradors at Dog Day Acres. Through the K9Sensus Foundation she teaches handlers across search and rescue, law enforcement, sport and private-sector detection.

Watch your puppy. Be curious.
Robin Greubel | K9Sensus Foundation

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