

playing like a DOG

School might be out for the day, but class is in session for the family dog. Heather Smith with the U.S. Dog Agility Association showed us how to set up a backyard obstacle course that's a learning experience for everyone.

Tunnel A play tunnel from a local toy store is an inexpensive and realistic obstacle. To keep it from moving, place a piece of canvas over the top and use tent stakes to secure the cloth on each side.

Weave poles Create a dog-size passage using practice cones. Each time you practice, move the cones closer together until your dog learns she needs to weave between them.



Dog walk For a safer backyard version of this obstacle, which is typically elevated, use any thin object your dog can walk along on the ground. A blanket or rug folded hot-dog style will do. As your dog gets the hang of it, switch to a low bench, such as one used at a picnic table.

Pause table Teach your dog to sit on the marker—a large pillow, a square of outdoor carpeting or even a big X marked in chalk—for a few seconds. Stay nearby at first. As your dog learns the course, try walking a few steps away to see if he'll stay put.

Jumps Two milk crates and a broom do the trick. So do two kids holding a stick. Make it easy at first, says Smith. "What you're really teaching is the meaning of the 'jump' command." Keep fingers loose or the broom unattached so the stick can fall freely if your dog hits it midair.

Safety tip: Don't use bricks, jagged planks or other rough materials to build your course. Keep components low so a fall won't result in injury. "You don't want to do anything that would shake the dog's confidence in you or herself," says Smith. "The trust factor is very important." •

you're the coach

- Use only positive motivators such as treats, balls and squeaky toys. Choose your dog's favorite—the best motivator is different for every pet.
- Act out the desired action, with the motivator in hand.
- Keep training sessions short—around 15 minutes—and focus on teaching just one or two obstacles at a time.
- If you haven't already, teach basic manners like "sit," "stay" and "lie down."
- Stay in the background and let your child give the commands. "The dog needs to understand that the child is in charge," says Smith, "especially since kids are pretty low on the household totem pole." Any child old enough to enunciate clearly can be obeyed. "With treats, anything is possible," says Smith. Pick up dog treats at your neighborhood Publix.

If you're interested in competing in dog agility events, visit usdaa.com for more information. The USDAA has a Junior Handler Program for kids under age 18, but children are allowed to compete in adult courses as well. If you're new to the sport, Smith recommends taking a local training class. "As with any new activity, it's easier if you have someone with knowledge to help you along."



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