

Which Bucket Is Empty?

A simple way to understand what
your dog needs most right now



By Dr. Cathy Klein



Which Bucket Is Empty?

If you're here, you probably don't need more advice.

You need a clear place to start.

Most dog problems aren't about a "bad dog" or a "bad owner."

They're usually about something being missing.

This little guide helps you figure out what that is.

Almost every challenge fits into one (or more) of three buckets: **Fun. Calm. Movement.**

When you fill the right bucket first, things get easier fast.

No pressure. No rules.

Just a simple way to stop guessing and start feeling better together.

The Bucket Finder

Before You Start

There's no scoring here.

No right or wrong answers.

Just read each section and notice what feels familiar.

The game that makes you say “oh.. this helps” is where to start.

You don't need to fix everything. You just need the right first step.



The Fun Bucket

This bucket might be empty if your dog:

Ignores you unless food is involved

Gets distracted easily, especially outside

Would rather watch the world than check in with you

Loses interest quickly

Feels more excited about the environment than being with you

And if you often think

“They don’t listen to me”

“They’re stubborn”

“They’re just not motivated”

This isn’t defiance.

It’s usually a sign that there’s room to make your relationship more fun so you feel more connected.

The Calm Bucket

This bucket might be empty if your dog:

Struggles to relax at home

Jumps, barks, or reacts quickly to real or imagined things

Whines, cries, jumps, mouths, chews, nips, or feels overwhelmed by people, dogs, or new places

Whines or cries when left alone

Has trouble switching off and lying down for more than 20 minutes

Seems “on” all the time

And if you often feel drained, on edge

Calm isn't something you force.

It's something dogs learn when life feels safe and predictable.

The Movement Bucket

This bucket might be empty if your dog:

Pulls on walks or lunges at dogs

Has bursts of energy that feel chaotic

Paces, whines, or seems restless outdoors

Acts out more when walks are skipped

Feels better after moving but worse when movement is rushed

And if walks feel:

Stressful, disorganized, more work than relaxing

This usually isn't too much energy. It's often a sign that your dog doesn't recognize the value of being teammates.



Pause Here

Which bucket stood out most?

That's your starting place.

If you're unsure or stuck between buckets, start with the Calm Bucket.

About 80% of my dog lessons begin there, because calm makes everything else easier.

You don't need to read this like a test. Just notice what feels true right now.



Try One Game Today

Pick the bucket you chose and try the matching game.

You don't need long sessions.

Two to five minutes is plenty.

Stop while it still feels easy.



Fun Bucket Game: Two Toy Tug

This game teaches your dog that being with you keeps the fun going.

Bring one toy to life close to the ground. Let your dog tug for a few seconds.

Then freeze. Go completely still.

Behind your back, bring the second toy to life. When your dog drops toy #1 and switches toys, play again.

No cues.

No asking for a drop.

Just play, pause, switch, play.

Celebrate when they choose to drop the toy and move towards the other toy.

Stop while your dog still wants more.

Calm Bucket Game: Sit and Zen

This game teaches your dog how to relax in a defined space.

Place a dog bed near a window or quiet spot with something to watch about 10 feet away.

When your dog chooses to sit or lie down, quietly drop a treat in the middle of the bed.

No cues. Just soft smiles and a quiet “yes.”

If your dog gets up, pause and wait.

Encourage your dog to return to bed, reinforce the choice when they do.

One or two minutes is enough.

Calm grows when you make space for it.



Movement Bucket Game: U-Turn Walks

This game turns walks into teamwork.

Start right in front of your house.

Walk a few steps, then calmly turn left in a U and walk the other way.

After the turn, offer a treat as you move forward together.

Repeat for a minute or two. There's no destination. Just movement, pause, and rhythm.

Movement doesn't have to be far to build teamwork and connection.



If you take nothing else from this guide, take this:

You don't need a better dog.

You don't need to train harder.

You don't need to fix everything.

Most dogs struggle when something is missing.

Most people struggle when they're guessing.

Now you're not guessing anymore.

You know where to start.

You have one simple game.

You have a way to make life feel a little easier today.

That's enough.

Start with the bucket that feels most empty.

Play the game for a few minutes.

Stop while it still feels good.

Pay attention to the small shifts.

They add up faster than you think.

Life with dogs isn't meant to feel like work.

Life is meant to feel shared.

Fun first.

Move together.

Calm follows.

If you'd like more simple tools like these, you can find them at calmdogcompanion.com

You've got this.

