

Enrichment

Enrichment activities are great ways to engage your dog's brain and improve their quality of life. Whether it be through a food puzzle toy or exploring a new environment, there are lots of different ways we can incorporate enrichment in our everyday routine. We want to curate opportunities for our dogs to be dogs. When brainstorming enrichment activities, think of a dog's natural instinct to play, chase, sniff, chew, and scavenge.

Food

There are a variety of enrichment toys and activities that utilize food to add variety to the way our dogs eat. Some ideas include hiding treats or kibble around the house, giving them their meal in a puzzle toy, or even wrapping kibble up in a towel your dog has to unroll for them to find. There are plenty of food puzzles on the market, but we especially love the Kong Wobbler, Starmark Bob-a-Lot (pictured right), and any of the Nina Ottoson puzzles. Even putting your dog's kibble in a slow bowl or in a muffin tin can add some excitement to them eating their regular meal.



If you'd like an enrichment activity your dog can work on for a while, you can fill Kongs, a variety of West Paw items such as the Toppl, Tux, or Qwizl, a Starmark Pickle Pocket, or even a beef trachea. If your dog needs a bland diet or reduced calories, you simply can soak their kibble in water or low sodium broth and freeze the kibble mush in any of the aforementioned items. Otherwise, get creative with combinations of plain Greek yogurt, pumpkin, unsweetened applesauce, and wet food. There are also a variety of dog safe fruits and vegetables you can incorporate when stuffing enrichment items, too!

Physical

Walks are a great way to add enrichment to your dog's life, and they are most impactful when your dog gets to explore new environments - checking out a new trail, turning on a different street than normal, etc. There are also activities you can do right in your backyard that get your dog moving such as providing them a designated digging area. Especially when a dog loves to dig, it can be helpful to give them an area to fulfill that need. You can simply fill a kiddie pool with sand or dirt and even bury things in it to entice your dog to dig.



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Cognitive

While food toys do work your dog's brain, there are also specific activities that you can do to help get your pup thinking. You can do a short training session with your dog to refresh old skills or teach them a fun trick. You can also provide them with plush puzzle toys such as the burrow toys through Zippy Paws or Outward Hound. There are also dog sports such as nose work that provide fun activities for you and your dog to get their brain going. Another fun game to work your dog's brain is hide and seek. While often easier when you have a second set of hands to hold your dog, it can be done independently. Simply do as you did as a kid where you hide and encourage your dog to find you. Initially, make the game easy for the dog, but you can add difficulty as they understand what the game entails. It is also helpful to be consistent in the phrase/cue you use to tell your dog to find you, so they understand when the game is happening. When they do find you, make it a party with physical affection, treats, or the presentation of a toy, so they have fun playing the game!



Sensory

Just like humans, dogs have five senses that can be enriched through various forms of stimulation. Chasing and popping bubbles is a fun activity for many dogs, and some companies have even made dog specific peanut butter flavored bubbles. You can also let them explore your spice garden as long as they are dog safe herbs like mint or parsley. If you have bricks or concrete pavers around your house, you can also add scents to those items for your dog to sniff. Sniffing in general is a great way to work your dog's brain. You can plan specific walks for your dog to sniff by going to a wooded trail or empty field and letting your dog go at their own pace and investigate whatever smells they'd like. It is often easiest to do these walks with your dog on a harness and with a long leash, so they have some room to roam safely.



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Toys



It is not always realistic to buy new toys for your dog every week, and you don't have to. You can store some of your dog's used toys and rotate which toys your dog has out to keep their toys fresh. While we know the toy isn't new, our dog hasn't seen it in a couple of weeks, and it feels new to them. You can also use toys your dog has torn up and restuff them, so they can tear it up again (as long as your dog doesn't ingest the stuffing). A cardboard box can also be a fun toy for your dog with low cost to you. You can even seal the box with fun treats or toys inside and let them rip it while you monitor them to limit risk of ingestion. Giving them safe vegetables like iceberg lettuce can also provide a low cost "toy" for your dog to safely shred. For dogs who enjoy chase, a flirt pole can be a fun investment to fulfill that desire.

Social

While not every dog loves other people and dogs, those that do can find enrichment out of social activities. Giving dogs opportunities to be around other dogs allows for them to learn from each other as well as play. Puppies can learn to moderate their exuberance and nervous dogs can gain confidence when matched with the right canine partner at social events. For the dogs who prefer people, you can host people at your house or invite some friends on a walk to fulfill that social desire of greeting and interacting with people.

Test out some of the ideas above and incorporate them into your routine to add excitement to your dog's life. Some dogs who exhibit nuisance behavior that are rooted in boredom will reduce practicing the behavior because all of their mental and physical needs are being met. If you have any questions about any of the ideas listed above, our staff would be happy to talk about any of them in more detail!



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