

# Love Your Life With Dogs (even more!)

## A Practical Guide To A Better Relationship Between You & Your Best Friend

Everyone loves their dog; it goes without saying, right? And they love us back just as much. However, have you ever stopped to consider the possibility that there are ways and means that could enable us to love our lives with dogs even more than we do now?

People who share their lives with dogs do so for a variety of reasons. Companionship, protection, self-image and entertainment are just some of the motivations for becoming a dog owner. Unlike our people relationships, we rarely question how we can improve upon the two way connection between ourselves and our dogs. Why? Because dogs are, by nature, incredibly adaptable and acquiescent, we feel that as long as they're not doing anything palpably offensive and they are delivering the goods on the 'what dogs do best' front (companionship, protection, entertain et al) we're content. Conversely, provided we're giving them food, drink and a dry place to sleep, so are they. Given our unconscious predisposition for failing to scrutinize our human/canine relationships, we thought we'd provide an insight into what makes us both tick as well as looking at methods we can use to improve each other's lives for the better.

Acclaimed animal behaviour expert Stephen G King explains the key motivations of the human/canine relationship from the dog's perspective.

Our dogs spend a fair degree of their time on their own or have, at most, one other friend to share their company.

So what happens to us and our pets in those periods between sleeping, walking and eating?

Well scientifically it is an environmental event called enrichment.

As we're getting scientific at this point, here's the technical explanation; .Environmental enrichment is the provision of stimuli, which promotes the expression of species- appropriate behaviour with stimulating activities.. Phew!

The dog, as is commonly known, is a species descended from the wolf, possibly the Southern wolf (*Canis lupus pallipes*). Wolves themselves are social carnivores that can combine into packs, although they operate within three survival categories:

- 1 Solitary predators
- 2 Family pack hunters
- 3 Large pack hunters.

Thousands of years of domestication and man-made selection have produced breeds, with modified social repertoires.

Many dogs have breed specific behaviours that are hard-wired such as the Springer Spaniel who is visually orientated and seems to be distracted by anything that moves in the air, such as a leaf falling from a tree.

The Border Collie likes to herd and chase joggers, motor bikes and other things that move across the ground.

Owners of such dogs often wonder why their dog is not paying attention in an outdoor environment, despite having their favourite treats on hand which normally work so well at home.

For this type of dog, food cannot compete with a field of birds or a herd of sheep on the move. So enrichment for this type of dog is quite specifically defined. They're almost telling you, nay screaming at you, about what makes them tick above all else but maybe you haven't consciously read these signals in the past.

#### Activity levels

Dogs spend a considerable portion of their time inactive, however, as an opportunist, the dog is adapted to seeking a wide variety of rewarding situations in unpredictable locations. The dog is therefore much more likely to be interested in novel items and circumstances. In contrast, a predictable and limiting environment may make these non-active periods boring and as such we see an overall decrease in interaction within the environment. The dog becomes socially and emotionally lethargic.

The dog is famed as being a very adaptable animal and a healthy adult can cope with a range of conditions, particularly if it has access to areas with different environmental surroundings.

Animals have emotionally complex lives and need appropriate environments and stimulation.

Good housing, giving the dog 'a place of their own in the home', affords them the opportunity to exercise a degree of choice, to manipulate or chew safe objects, to interact with humans, to choose not to interact, to play, to rest, all of which satisfies their behavioural needs.

#### Environmental Enrichment for Companion Animals

Providing a positive, rewarding and stimulating environment based on trust and affection teaches our pets to stay enthusiastic and interested.

The purpose of environmental enrichment is to increase the overall welfare of the dog by allowing them to burn off calories in a safe and natural way, which in turn allows them to behave more naturally in a restricted environment.

The dog learns to cope with unexpected changes in the environment, and is less likely to be stressed by handling, restraint or changes in environment. A decrease in emotion based behaviour can lead to a decrease in physiological and psychological stress.

#### Things Dogs Like To Work For

Food, water, sexual stimulation, foraging, sniffing / scenting, attention, grooming, coolness (when body temperature is high), and warmth (when the body temperature is low). These are all known as primary reinforcers.

As these examples suggest, primary reinforcers often have to do with biological processes. Some primary reinforcers are not immediately obvious; for instance if you were a dog restrained in your home/kennel and cannot move about or get out, the chance of freedom can be very reinforcing and you would strive to achieve it more than a dog who had open access to fields for most of their day.

### Why Is It Important To Know What Your Dog Likes To Work For?

Prevention is better than cure. Knowing what a dog likes and will work for is an important factor in having a stimulated dog; especially if the animal spends most of the time looking at four walls and food is provided independent of its behaviour.

In the wild, dogs are hunter-scavengers; it is natural for them to spend a large amount of their daily energy looking for food. Pet dog's needs are similar and in contrast certain elements of our own lifestyle which have been forced upon the dog for our convenience could in fact lead to a degree of lethargy in the animals behaviour . feeding a dog once a day is a prime example.

If you've ever been on a long haul flight or even a medium distance air passage, can you recall how excited you were about the in flight meal?

You spend the first hour getting comfortable and then the rest of the journey you're reliant on the stewards breaking up the monotony of the trip by bringing you food, drinks, snacks or putting on a film. Your environment, your stimulation is in THEIR hands and there's not much you can do about it.

You get to a point where you are so looking forward to the dried out cheese sandwiches brought by the flight crew you could almost describe it as a genuinely stimulating event in an otherwise boring passage of your life. You anticipate, you imagine what the food's going to taste like, you wonder what might be accompanying it and then it finally arrives, what a build up...are then, in a few short moments, all gone. Now you're back to waiting and anticipating again and you are lulled back into the monotony of the flight.

Welcome to your dog's world! Imagine waiting all day, anticipating those fantastic few moments when your food is being prepared, you know it's coming, you can smell it, this is your meal and NO mistaking, oh this is truly exciting.then, in seconds, it's all over. Gone. Bored again. What can I do to shake this feeling of tediousness? I know, I'm going to pull all the washing off the line outside. That looks like fun.

Feeding your dog periodically through the day, without the need to increase their overall volume of food can give them a great deal of mental stimulation. They'll love it!

When undesirable behaviours such as, mischief, destruction, anxiety or even aggression manifest themselves, boredom born of a monotonous life can often be traced as the route cause.

Introverted behaviour such as sucking, licking and biting oneself on the paws, wrists and flank areas can be another expression of the dog's boredom. Whether the dog is bored or not, anxious or not, behavioural enrichment is required to keep the dog happy and healthy and, in nearly all cases, your dog's environment and therefore behavioural enrichment is controlled almost exclusively by you.

## Stimulation: Dog activity puzzles

Providing an enriching and stimulating environment is an important factor in raising a healthy well-adjusted pet. Feeding your pet by bowl at regular intervals will satisfy your pet's nutritional needs, but does nothing to address their psychological and emotional desires.

Interactive feeding toys can be a great tool for breaking up their feeding schedule and allowing the dog to work (scavenge) for their culinary reward.

Many zoos have included a variety of interactive feeding programs into their animal's daily feeding schedule. Some of these programs mimic foraging choices similar to that found in an animal's natural habitat, including hiding food, or hanging fruit from a tree.

If you've ever seen Steve Irwin, the self-proclaimed 'Crocodile Hunter', you will no doubt have witnessed how he risks life and limb to ensure his animals have to 'work' for their meals. He stands by the side of the water, creates motion and encourages the crocs to rise from the shallows and attack the meat in his possession. Of course, he could just as easily throw the carcass over the fence and the crocs would still get their meal, nutritionally they'd be just as well off but emotionally they'd be missing out.

Other programs use unusual and challenging food items that provide mental stimulation, such as frozen mixtures of natural foods, feeder puzzles, or food stuffed interactive toys. The results of these programs have added variety and enrichment for zoo animals, and have helped decrease depression, pacing, and boredom common to animals in captivity.

### How Do Interactive Food Puzzles Work For Mental Stimulation?

1. The food is distributed over a longer period of time. A food dispenser filled with Chicken, Lamb, Liver and or even 30 pieces of kibble lasts about 1/2 hour, whereas the same amount of food is normally consumed by the dog within thirty seconds to three minutes when the food is freely available. That means that the time spent foraging (= looking for food) increases and the dog is in a longer state of stimulation.
2. The food is not permanently available but instead is available randomly. This unpredictability may raise the vigilance of the animals, thus decreasing their boredom levels.
3. Maintenance is easy and does not require any additional time. The food dispenser itself is given to the dog to play with and can be refilled any time.
4. Even small amounts of food delivered by the dispenser have a strong effect on the behaviour of the animals. This is important, because all enrichment activities related to food have to be incorporated into the feeding and training schedule; this is much easier when the amount of food needed for enrichment is low.
5. It is inexpensive. This is obviously important, because high additional costs are often used as an argument against behavioural enrichment. You're not being asked to hang chicken carcasses from trees in the park, or drag rabbit skins along the ground for your dog to track and 'kill'.

Interactive food puzzles. A rather simple, inexpensive piece of kit that can help to enrich the dog's foraging experience and thus reduce boredom and monotony.

Note: If you have more than one dog, it is often a good idea to ensure they are kept separately when playing with food puzzles to avoid any potential conflict between dogs.

Scenting, tracking and foraging.

As part of the dog's behavioural enrichment program scenting and tracking should be encouraged. Most homes have a grassy enclosed exercise area where a dog can be let off the lead for a free run, if not use the different room in your house to hide objects. Pet owners should give their dog every opportunity to search using their nose. Searching and tracking exercises have proved an excellent remedy for under stimulated and over active dogs.

Playing hide and seek with your dog's favourite toy or even small portions of food is incredibly rewarding for the dog and if you don't get that warm, glowy feeling watching their little tail wag feverishly when they make 'the find' you should consider a trip to the doctor to see whether you actually posses a heartbeat!

There is one stipulation with behavioural enrichment programs, that is, that they are an individual exercise to do with each dog separately if you have more than one.

Hide and Seek . Canine Style.

1. Walk across a grassy area (preferably and enclosed garden), pressing firmly with your shoes or boots to make imprints on the ground.
2. Place the toy or interactive treat dispensing activity puzzle with some food somewhere discreet, but not impossible to locate.
3. Collect the dog.
4. Just let the dog off the lead and encourage them to 'follow your trail' to find the reward.

Another tracking game to play is called "Hansel & Gretall".

1. You walk to a point (ten yards), drop the dog's favourite toy in the grass and slightly cover it over with grass.
2. As you walk back drop small amounts of food where you are walking.

3. Drop some food just in front of your dog and release him to find the food on the track with his nose.

5 When he gets to the end of the track, he gets the surprise of his toy.

6. Scattering food around the exercise area and letting the dog find it is another great way to allow him to use his nose.

The Havaball is one such interactive treat which you can use to play these sort of games with and due to its ridges, it will also enable the dog to clean their teeth below the gumline when chewing on it. [www.Havaball.co.uk](http://www.Havaball.co.uk)

Other games you can play with your dog include the predatory sequence game. Dogs love to rip, tear and dissect! Get an old rag and wrap up a piece of chicken or liver, by tying as many knots as you can, so that it is difficult for the dog to get out and use as above. Dig for victory. Part of the garden area should also have a digging area, three-ft square with sand added to the soil to make digging easier! Bury titbits, toys, bones and chews in the pit and let him find them.

#### Don't Forget Physical Stimulation

Regular grooming each day not only keeps the dog in tip top physical condition, it also promotes mutual trust and affection between pet and owner. Make grooming a fun, regular activity and use the time to check the dog for lumps, bumps or abrasions. Loving your life with dogs means you want to spend as long together as possible, regular touch and knowing the dog's body inside out could save their life where cancerous lumps are concerned.

Remember breed differences should be kept in mind when considering enrichment options. Your average Collie will enjoy robust, motion based games. Hounds will love the scent activities and Labradors you JUST KNOW will love anything where food is the ultimate reward!

Remedy undesirable behaviours by rewarding desirable behaviours. It's a very, very simple rule to live by and experts agree that positive reinforcement training will provide the most superior and long lasting results.

The more your pet is actively engaged in positive play during sessions or training exercises, the less time he or she has to develop undesirable behaviour.

Stephen G King 2005 ©

[www.havaball.co.uk](http://www.havaball.co.uk)

[www.clickerzoneuk.co.uk](http://www.clickerzoneuk.co.uk)