

Throw Away Your Feeding Bowls!

Environmental Enrichment for Companion Animals

Environmental enrichment needs to promote an improvement to the expression of species- appropriate behaviour with motivating activities. Providing a positive, rewarding and stimulating environment based on trust and affection rather than force and compulsion teaches our pets to stay enthusiastic and interested.

The purpose of environmental enrichment is to increase the overall welfare of the dog by allowing the dog to burn off calories in a safe and natural way, which in turn allows it to behave more naturally in a restricted environment. The animal learns to cope with unexpected changes in the environment, and is less likely to be stressed by handling, restraint, and change in environment. A decrease in emotional behaviours furthermore indicates a decrease in physiological and psychological stress.

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. On the other hand, 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. However, the dog is a very adaptable animal and a healthy adult can cope with a range of conditions, particularly if it has access to areas with different microclimates.

Animals have emotionally complex lives and need appropriate environments and stimulation. Good housing should allow the dog to exercise an element of choice, to manipulate or chew safe objects, and provide opportunities for human and canine socialisation, which satisfies their behavioural needs.

Things dogs like and will work for

Rewards are those, which are immediately reinforcing and are simply reinforcing as a result of the dog's evolution as a species. These can include food, water, sexual stimulation, foraging, sniffing / scenting, attention, grooming, coolness (when body temperature is high), and warmth (when the body temperature is low). 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 and cannot move about or get out, the chance of freedom can be very rewarding.

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 one of the worst things we can do is feed a dog once a day. When the food is gone in seconds, we wonder why the dog is bored or under stimulated and now has extra time to devote to those misbehaviours! Other behaviours might increase in the absence of the owner, to fill the free time. When undesirable behaviours tend to increase, boredom, anxiety and even aggression can be the result. The types of problems incurred by pet dog owners are chewing/destructive, barking/howling, pacing/hyper-active. Introverted behaviour such as sucking, licking and biting oneself. Paws, wrists and flank areas seem to be favourite spots to work on, although sometimes the root of its tail, seem to be a target. Whether the dog is bored, anxious or not, behavioural enrichment is required to keep the dog happy and healthy.

Dog activity puzzles

The food dispenser (and there are quite a few on the market) offers several advantages over conventional feeding methods:

1) The food is distributed over a longer period of time. A food dispenser filled with 30 pieces of kibble lasts about 1/2 hour, whereas the same amount of food is consumed within thirty seconds to three minutes when the food is freely

available. That means that the time spent foraging (= looking for food) increases.

2) The food is not permanently available but instead is available randomly. This unpredictability may raise the vigilance of the animals.

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 schedule; this is much easier when the amount of food needed for enrichment is low.

5) It is inexpensive. These rather simple interactive toys can help to enrich the dog's foraging experience and thus reduce boredom and monotony. Any food or drink enrichment that requires extra manipulation and prolongs consumption time is a good thing, thus providing mental stimulation.

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. Pet owners should give there dog every opportunity to search using their nose. Searching and tracking exercises have proved an excellent remedy for under stimulated and over active dogs.

To find food or a toy is the dogs ultimate goal, as using its foraging and olfactory canids senses is an important canid sense. If the dog could not hunt, track and catch up to its quarry for most of the time, the dog would not have survived. Dogs will use their nose to pick up scent particles in the air, on the ground, and or a combination of the two, depending on the overall environmental factors.

How do I do it?

1. Walk across the lawn, pressing firmly your shoe or boots to make prints.
2. Place the toy or interactive treat dispensing activity puzzle with some food.
3. Walk back to where you have the dog tied up. (This is a "free" track; no harness or long line is necessary).
4. Just let the dog off the lead to find the reward.
5. Another tracking game to play is called "Hansel & Gretall".

6. You walk to a point (ten yards), drop the dog's favourite toy in the grass and slightly cover it over with grass.
7. As you walk back drop small amounts of food where you are walking.
8. Drop some food just in front of your dog and release him to find the food on the track with his nose.
9. When he gets to the end of the track, he gets the surprise of his toy.
10. Scattering food around the exercise area and letting the dog find it is another great way to allow him to use his nose.

Digging

Part of the garden area should have a digging area, approximately three-ft square with sand added to the soil to make digging easier! Bury titbits, toys, bones and chews in the permitted digging area and let him find them.

Grooming

Regular grooming each day promotes mutual trust and affection and allows us to check the dog for signs of health, which shapes a calm contented dog. Breed differences and husbandry requirements should be kept in mind when considering enrichment options.

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