

Unleashing the Joy: Exploring the World of Dog Enrichment

Enrichment has become a buzz word in the dog training community but what does it really mean? The idea of enrichment being critical to our pet dogs' health and wellbeing has grown in popularity and is now viewed as an essential responsibility of a dog guardian to understand how best to include it in their dogs' lives.

People think of training programs, dog sports and walks in the neighbourhood as "enrichment". But are those activities truly "enriching" and if not, what activities are? Training, structured neighbourhood walks and dog sports are all fantastic activities that help with the human-canine bond, burn some energy, and teach necessary skills to allow the dog to function in the human world. When I first heard the word "enrichment" I understood it to mean providing stimulation for my dog both mentally and physically. I took my dog Casey training regularly, practiced her skills daily, walked her in the neighbourhood 3 times a day. I thought I was doing well! Yet, my dog was still struggling with minor behaviour issues. She acted frustrated, would bite the leash, or jump at me on our walks, was difficult to control in the home. Her behavior didn't reflect the fulfilling life I thought I had provided for her. What was absent? Enrichment.

Animal enrichment is defined as providing stimulating opportunities that encourage animals to express their species-specific behaviours. Enrichment is practiced in zoos to keep the animals physically and psychologically healthy - their habitats and daily routines redesigned to afford them opportunities to behave as they would in their natural environment. This idea shifted to our own pets. What would their natural state look like and how could we give our dogs the chance to "be dogs"?

What is truly enriching for a dog is seen in the behaviour of free-living dogs. From them, we learn what natural behaviours dogs perform daily without any human intervention. A study conducted in India by Banerjee, A., & Bhadra, A. (2021) entitled "Time-activity budget of urban-adapted free-ranging dogs. *Acta Ethologica*, 25(1), 33-42"* found that more than 50% of a dog's waking hours are spent foraging and moving. The remaining daytime hours are used for social interactions such as play, mating, vocalizing, and posturing. The amount of time dogs spent awake varied from 40% to 70% a day. At least 50% of the time they were foraging and moving, with the remaining time spent in social interactions.

Most of our pet dogs are not moving and foraging 5 to 7 hours a day. The average pet dog spends considerable time waiting inside kennels, crates, houses etc. until their human guardian lets them out. Then, dogs are put on leashes and walked around neighborhoods at a pace that is slow by dog standards and restricted by the walker's rules. To top it all off, the walk is short, lasting between 30 minutes and an hour. Some dogs might get to play fetch or go to a dog park, go to training, or do a dog sport or occasionally get to run on a trail. These are just a few of the typical human-driven activities that are perceived as enrichment. Although many dogs will enjoy chasing a ball or playing with dog friends at the park, not all dogs do. These activities are controlled by us, the humans, and the dog is not given much choice. This is not true enrichment or, at the very least, should not be the whole enrichment plan.

An enriching activity gives the dog the opportunity to choose behaviours that are natural to their species, with no direction from humans. It is a wonderful way of ensuring all the dog's needs are met and can prevent and/or improve behavior, if done thoughtfully and consistently. This requires a plan, and that plan will look different for each dog.

There are endless ideas about how to provide enrichment for your dog. Here are a few examples to help keep dogs happy, healthy and stress free.

1. Natural walks. Nothing fills my heart with joy more than watching a dog run through a field or enjoying the day, sniffing, and exploring without any pressure or interference from humans. If you do not have a large field or recall is an issue, I recommend investing in a 20-foot-long line (a long line is not a retractable leash) and practicing how to manage it, to ensure you and the dog are safe. Go to a large soccer field, a nice trail, or park and let your dog wander, explore, sniff, and walk! I call it the illusion of freedom. Manage the line and walk at the dog's pace when possible. Try not to give your dog commands or tug on the line. This type of walking mimics the migratory way dogs naturally walk and is particularly beneficial to any dog that struggles with reactivity or feels anxious when out on busy streets.
2. Provide opportunities to forage. Play hide and seek with food in your home or yard. Use treat-dispensing balls. Roll treats up in a towel and tie the ends together to give your dog a challenge (only if your dog will not eat the towel!). These games provide your dog opportunities to forage and problem solve while providing a variety of sensory experiences including sound and scent stimulation. An excellent activity I recommend is Animal Centered Education Free Work. This fun and creative framework combines a variety of sensory exercises that can have a profound effect on dog behaviour and resiliency while helping dogs to relax. You set up an open course with various textures, items, puzzles, and obstacles then sprinkle your dog's food throughout the course and let the dog explore and forage!
3. Dogs love to chew and lick! Give your dog a Kong or Tobbl stuffed with delicious food or a lick mat with homemade dog food smeared on it then frozen. Present these to your dog when it is time to wind down after a busy day. It lets your dog work their jaw muscles and get the oral stimulation they need.
4. Give your dog a massage and sing a lullaby! Helping your dog to relax by fulfilling their social need is another type of enrichment. Dogs are social animals and their bond to humans is unique and profound. Both of you get comfortable then start to gently massage your dog's sides and hind legs while singing a soft lullaby. Watch as your dog slowly releases all tension from their body and they start to close their eyes. You will feel a whole new level of endearment towards your dog.
5. Breed specific enrichment ideas. Enrichment is unique to each dog. What a dog likes and dislikes will dictate whether an activity is enriching. Each breed has its own intrinsic behaviours they were selectively bred for. Many tasks, while providing an opportunity to

express genetic behavioural traits, also act as a form of cognitive enrichment. Have large herding balls for herding breeds to collect, move and gather. Playing tug with your sport dog can be a blast for them. Find out what your dog's favourite activity is and design an outlet for the instinctual behaviour.

These are just a few examples of enriching activities for your dog. An activity is enriching only if your dog is given the opportunity to participate without external pressure and able to choose to participate or not. Listed below are some excellent resources to help you set up and implement a plan.

Let's circle back to my girl. Once I learned about enrichment, I made some changes to my plan for her. Most of her walks were on long lines on a trail or park or running at a neighbour's field. She was given cardboard boxes to shred as often as I could provide them. She had items she liked to chew or lick, and every night she got a 10-minute gentle massage while I sang her favourite lullaby. What I witnessed was a much calmer dog, able to tolerate more stressors in the environment, and her behaviour issues diminished significantly. We still went to training, walked in our neighbourhood, etc. and she thoroughly enjoyed doing all those activities because it was time with me (and she got lots of treats!) But incorporating more dog-centric, natural activities into her enrichment plan resulted in the most glorious canine-human experience I've ever had.

Some resources:

AniEd 100 Days of Enrichment <https://aniedireland.com/100daysofenrichment/>

Canine Compilation Free Work Enrichment for Dogs <https://caninecompilation.com/free-work-enrichment-for-dogs/>

Canine Enrichment for the Real World: Authors Allie Bender and Emily Strong:
<https://petharmonytraining.com/resources/canine-enrichment-for-the-real-world/>

*<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10211-021-00379-6>



Karen Baxter, CDBC, Dipl.CBST, L-CCC, CPDT-KA

Certified Behaviour Consultant and Trainer
Member of the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants
Unified K9 Behaviour Centre
289-383-4136
www.unifiedk9.ca

