

As we learn more about animals and the complexities of their thoughts and feelings, enrichment has become a very popular topic. On the surface enrichment seems like something easily defined but what does it really mean and why is it important? This article outlines what enrichment is, why it is important, and some tips for how to introduce or increase enrichment in your dog's (or any animal's) life. For much of this article, we focus on dogs for simplicity, but this applies to any animal that is part of your family.

What is Enrichment?

Enrichment is the process of improving the quality of an animal's life. Anything that increases your dog's mental and physical well-being can be classified as enrichment. Enrichment should be safe, interesting to your dog, and desirable. While a nail trim could be for the betterment of your dog's health, if they dislike the process of having their nails trimmed, it is not enrichment.

For humans, there are countless varieties of enrichment within reach almost every minute of the day. We have phones and computers, television and books, music and hobbies, friends to talk to, puzzles and board games, outdoor activities, sports, pets, quiet time, etc. We also have the independence to choose which activity we would like to engage in (and opposable thumbs to give us access). Life would be rather dull without the opportunity to pursue our interests. Unfortunately for our dogs, they do not always have the same opportunities for stimulation or the freedom to choose what to do and when to do it. Fortunately for us, as our pet's guardian, we have the privilege to provide them with the enrichment that they need.

So, what does enrichment look like in daily life? There are endless ideas of games to play and activities to do with your dog. Enrichment is about providing your dog opportunities to have a good time and to engage their mind and their senses. Enrichment can be as simple as giving your dog time to roll in some grass, sniff around during their walk, snuggle on the couch, get a massage, try a new type of food, play fetch in the yard, or have a playdate with doggy friends. In short, if you're looking to add more enrichment into your dog's life, a good starting point is to find out what your dog likes to do and do more of those things.

Why Provide Enrichment?

Now that we understand what enrichment is, what are some of the benefits to be gained by adding enrichment and why should it be a priority? There are many reasons that enrichment is wonderful and beneficial, the following are just a few of those reasons.

Duty as Caretakers - As guardians and advocates for animals, it is our duty to do our best to give the pets in our care the best lives possible. The animals in our care are only able to interact within the environment we give them.

Brain Health - Mental stimulation is necessary for brain development and brain health throughout life. Just like people, an animal's brain needs stimulation to stay sharp and active.

Fulfilling Biological Needs - Dogs have an innate need to perform behaviors. Many dogs want to have a "job". Without meaningful and fulfilling outlets to perform those behaviors, dogs may find undesirable ways to satisfy their need to act. A bored dog is more likely to find a way to occupy themselves, and that might not always be in a way that is safe or desirable. Boredom can be decreased with plentiful opportunities to do something engaging.

Build Confidence and Problem-Solving Skills - Enrichment is a great way to build your dog's problem-solving skills. Many activities can show your dog how to manipulate their environment to achieve a desired outcome. Similarly, learning how to interact with new things can increase confidence and help your dog cope with the unexpected.

Bonding - Discovering what activities your dog enjoys can help you have a better understanding of your dog's personality. If you know what your dog prefers, you get more out of your efforts. Time spent together while doing fun activities is a great way to build your bond with your dog.

How do I provide Enrichment?

The idea of adding enrichment to your dog's life can be daunting, there is so much to consider. Where do you start? Consider the following points, and you'll be well on your way to creating a more enriching life for the animal in your care.

Enrichment must be safe. Not only must the activity be physically safe, but the dog must feel safe in the environment. It is unlikely that a dog will be able to enjoy an activity if they do not feel safe. Keep an eye on your dog's body language while they are engaging in activities to determine how they might be feeling about the situation. Similarly, consider possible risks when introducing activities. For example, if your dog is inclined to eat non-food items, it may be best to avoid providing things that could be dangerous when ingested or use an increased amount of supervision. If you have multiple dogs, consider doing activities separately to prevent resource guarding.

Enrichment should be fun. Activities should be something your dog enjoys doing and is something they want to participate in. Their interests may change over time and choice is always good. While your dog may enjoy playing tug on one day, they might prefer to engage their sense of smell on a different day.

Consider Natural Behaviors – Dogs are innately driven to do a variety of behaviors. Often, these behaviors can pop up in undesirable or annoying ways. For example, the dog that chews up shoes or tears apart your couch cushions would probably enjoy a variety of chew toys, or to shred acceptable things like cardboard boxes or a head of lettuce. Other natural behaviors include sniffing, foraging, digging, playing, socializing, chasing, and more. Try offering opportunities to do all these behaviors to

see which ones your dog really likes to do. You may find that with an appropriate outlet, your dog is less likely to do these behaviors elsewhere.

Be Creative – There is an exciting and expansive number of toys and products created in the name of enrichment. Many of these are designed to engage your dog in a specific way, “this is for chewing”, “this is for foraging”, “this is for problem solving”. While these products are great and are typically easy to set up, don’t be afraid to get creative by using what you have on hand to build your own enrichment toys and games. Recyclables are a great and inexpensive way to get started. Boxes can be stacked, stuffed, nested, shredded, and hidden. Packing paper is great for hiding treats, shredding, and providing novel textures. Toilet paper tubes can be used to make your own treat dispensing toy. You can also take advantage of your immediate environment. Hide treats and toys, create an obstacle course of furniture or around the park, play in the leaves, or dig in some mulch. Think about the world from your dog’s perspective and how to engage their senses and provide outlets to perform natural behaviors.

Keep it Interesting – You may enjoy solving a word search puzzle on a quiet evening after work, you may even enjoy a second puzzle, but would you enjoy that exact same word search puzzle the next day? The same one every day for a week? It might get boring after a while. The same thing goes for dogs. Novelty is exciting and the chance to do different things and solve new problems is going to be more enriching than the same thing over and over. That doesn’t mean that your new puzzle toy is uninteresting after a few days, but maybe you switch it out for a different puzzle occasionally. Even better, create a rotation of several different activities to do. Some activities may get old fast, some might become a new staple that your dog would love to do every single day, and sometimes taking a break from a toy makes it fresh and new again when reintroduced.

Finding Time – Life can get busy, and it may be hard to find time to dedicate to enrichment. Enrichment doesn’t have to be hours of fun. In fact, most dogs probably don’t have that long of an attention span. Instead, find small ways to allow your dog to do something fun throughout the day. Allow your dog to make more decisions on their walk, sniff a tree for two minutes, go left instead of right, pause in the patch of sun. Reserve a portion of their regular meals and sprinkle it in the yard and let them search for it, or put it into a treat dispensing toy so they have to work for it. Pre-stuff puzzle toys or recycled props and bring them out periodically throughout the day. Before your dog’s meals is a great time to plan an activity because you already have your “time to feed the dog” time carved out of your day and you can add an extra 5-10 minutes to do an activity.

Animals in our care deserve the best that we have to offer, and we have the privilege of providing that for them. There are many benefits to be gained from creating a more fulfilling and exciting life for the animals in your family. Enrichment can be just as tiring or even more tiring than physical exercise. You may find that you get to know them even better than you did before. Take time to appreciate the way their nostrils flare when they sniff the ground, how they track the smell around the grass, how their eyes light up when they solve a puzzle or accomplish a goal, how their ears twitch when they’re

sleeping, how they squint happily as they gnaw on a chew toy. Have fun being creative and letting your dog show you their world. In the process of enriching your dog's life, you may just find that your life is enriched too.