

## Canine Enrichment

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**WHAT IS IT?** It broadly refers to all of the ways that we can meet our dog's needs each day – it includes so much more than a food puzzle or a new toy! Meeting your dog's needs should include plenty of outlets for them to practice species-typical behaviors. Using both a dog's sensory experience and their natural tendencies, we can help them get the most out of an enrichment opportunity. For an object, activity, or interaction to be enriching, it *must* be something that your dog enjoys.

### WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

**Help a dog practice desirable behaviors through structure.** Using enrichment to structure your dog's day can address many behavior challenges resulting from boredom or stress. Chewing/destruction, picking up/seeking out household items, mouthing, barking, or jumping (to name a few) are normal, species-typical behaviors – but that doesn't make them desirable! If this were a dog's world, chewing on the coffee table, eating the trash, or barking at strangers would be no big deal: those would simply be ways that a dog meets their needs the best ways they know how. Because we expect our dogs not to destroy furniture or dig in the trash, it's our job to provide them more appropriate ways to meet their needs. By structuring their environment, schedule, and activities so that they have intentional, appropriate outlets for these behaviors, they will be more likely to behave in ways that we find desirable. Exercise and providing a stuffed Kong prior to sitting down to a long work call can help keep them out of mischief, for example. Strategically providing enrichment opportunities can also address other behavior challenges – like behaviors associated with fear, reactivity, or frustration. If your dog barks at strangers, for example, putting them in another room, playing classical music, and providing something to chew on when having family over may alleviate their stress.

**Provide agency of choice to a dog's day.** Dogs have preferences just like people do. Observing their behavior and body language can help us understand their preferences, allowing us to better manage their day. A dog's body language is a window into how they feel about what is happening to or around them. For example, a dog who is avoiding other dogs at the dog park, or one who is growling at someone new approaching or reaching to pet, is communicating discomfort. In both cases, we are not meeting their needs by continuing those interactions. A playdate with a familiar dog instead of a large group of dogs, or providing a hiding spot to avoid interactions with strangers in their home, might better meet their needs by providing them with greater agency.

Providing choice should include variety. Even if a person has a favorite activity or meal, they can become bored with it if it's the only choice they have every day - the same is true for dogs! Rotate through a couple of their favorites to keep things new and exciting, and be prepared to think outside of the box based on the observations you've made. Does your dog love to go for car rides? Take them to get a pupaccino! Do they LOVE people? Go through Pet Assisted Therapy training to bring your dog to nursing homes or hospitals! Does your dog love finding critters? Try barn hunt sporting! Looking for a creative way to be active with your dog? Look into dog sports such as hoopers, rally, or agility!

**HOW CAN YOU USE IT TO MEET YOUR DOG'S NEEDS?** To make the most of your dog's enrichment, consider how they experience the world through their five senses. By incorporating their senses and incorporating activities that engage their natural tendencies, you can better design an enrichment program to meet their needs. Some activities that take these considerations into account include:

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- **Engage their super-hero sense of smell by letting them sniff!** Try a decompression walk in a quiet, novel area, or take some extra time along your normal route to let them stop and smell the roses. Consider taking a shorter, slower walk that allows for more stopping and sniffing - you'll find that your dog is just as tired at the end of it.
- **Let there be holes!** We recognize that digging a hole in the middle of the yard might not be ideal – consider a special garden bed or kiddie pool filled with sand or dirt dedicated just to your dog's enjoyment. Gentle petting and brushing are other great opportunities to engage your dog's sense of touch, just remember to always let them opt into and out of those interactions.
- **Natural foodies:** Most dogs love to eat – by learning what food they enjoy most, you can maximize their enrichment experience. Consider dog-safe human foods to add new flavor and texture to their meals. Try freezing their food, or using a food puzzle toy to make their meal a bit more stimulating than just a normal food bowl. Some great brands to check out include Kong, West Paw, PetSafe, and Outward Hound.
- **Soothing soundscapes:** Research shows that certain types of music can reduce stress and help dogs relax. Give your dog a puzzle toy and play some classical or reggae music, white noise, an audio book or talk radio, or the clinically tested "Through a Dog's Ear" playlist.
- **Natural tendencies for scavenging and foraging:** Many dogs prefer to engage with their meal in a way that is fun rather than eating it out of a bowl. Provide options for licking, chewing, and dissecting (cardboard boxes, paper towel or toilet paper rolls, egg cartons, etc.) as a part of each meal for a more relaxed and mentally exercised dog.
- **Physical activity:** Taking their physical and behavioral needs into consideration, tailor an activity schedule to your specific dog. Shorter walks might meet the needs of an older or overweight dog, while few, short, leashed walks won't cut it for a young, high-energy dog. Dogs who exhibit behaviors associated with fear or reactivity may be overwhelmed by long walks or hikes, and an active or easily aroused dog might need help learning how to "do nothing", separately from just being tired after a good romp.
- **Social enrichment:** Play with other animals and humans can be a great way to engage with your dog, taking their individual preferences into account. Most dogs don't love meeting every new dog in every situation – some are more selective about their friends, preferring one or two to a large group of dogs, while others prefer not to socialize with dogs at all. Similarly, some dogs love meeting new people, while others prefer to keep a smaller circle of friends. Think about how to incorporate their favorite things into their enrichment regimen.

Enrichment doesn't have to be a ton of work! Ideally, opportunities are simply structured into a dog's daily schedule. Pick options that are realistic for you, your household, your budget, and your schedule. Work smarter, not harder – incorporating enrichment activities to feed your dog their daily meals, taking a slow, "sniffy stroll" rather than a brisk walk in the neighborhood, or turning commercial breaks into short training sessions, can make a world of difference for your dog.

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### RESOURCES

**Pro Tip:** Many enjoyable enrichment activities can be frozen! Prepare your dog's meals in advance and pop them in the freezer overnight so they take even longer to consume.

#### To Purchase:

- **Kibble dispenser**
  - Kong Wobbler
  - Magic Mushroom
  - Starmark Bob-a-Lot
  - Kibble Nibble
- **Hollow food dispensers (for canned food, meat, squeeze cheese, etc.)**
  - Kong
  - West Paw Toppl
  - Orbee
  - Twist'n Treat
- **Puzzle Bowls**
  - The options are endless – search “puzzle bowl” or “slow feeder” on any search engine!
- **Puzzle Toys**
  - The options are endless – search “puzzle toy” or “food dispensing toy” on any search engine!
- **Chewies**
  - Bully stick
  - Himalayan/Yak chew
- **Snuffle Mats**
- **Licky Mats**

#### DIY:

**For the Dissector** – hide smelly snacks inside, layer inside of each other!

- Paper Towel Tube/toilet
- Paper Bag
- Busy Box
- Egg Carton

**For the Settler**

- Pupsicle
- Frozen bowls

**For the Forager**

- Food Scatter
  - Beginner: on a smooth surface like hardwood or a carpet/rug
  - Intermediate: in the grass
  - Expert: in the snow
- Pipe Feeder (PVC with holes drilled)
- Towel Maze “bowl”
- Stacked Tupperware, cups, or boxes with treats inside

#### GAMES:

- Scent games: <https://www.akc.org/expert-advice/training/indoor-scent-games-for-dogs/>
- Nosework class at DogKind (dogkindtraining.com)

#### OTHER:

- Dog sports: Agility, Dock diving, Rally-O, Disc Dog
- Through a Dog's Ear

#### Reading List/References

*Canine Enrichment for the Real World* by Allie Bender and Emily Strong

*Ditch the Bowl!* by Absolute Dogs

*Chill out Fido!* by Nan Arthur

*Inside of a Dog* by Alexandra Horowitz

*Cooperative Care* by Deborah Jones, PhD

[www.playwaydogs.com](http://www.playwaydogs.com): Play your way to a happier dog

“Canine Enrichment” Facebook group

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# Canine Enrichment

## A Dog's Emotional Cup

Every dog has a cup that needs to be filled—with social connection, security, access to reinforcers, and enrichment.

Some dogs seem to have a full cup most of the time, either because of a genetic pre-disposition, or because they have learned good ways to get a refill.

Most things that dogs do are completely normal—including the annoying stuff, like DIGGING up the garden, CHASING cats, or BARKING at the mailman. But all dogs show signs of stress when their cups get near empty.



### Signs your dog may be coping with an empty cup

- \* hoarding resources, over-protective
- \* over-reacting, or shutting down when exposed to new things
- \* restlessness
- \* slow to recover from exciting events
- \* changes in appetite
- \* escalating behaviors to get something or to get away from something
- \* increased grumpiness, or flare-ups
- \* intense social appeasement

### What refills a dog's cup:



- ▼ Doing Dog Things: SNIFFING, CHEWING, FORAGING, BARKING, DIGGING, PLAYING
- ▼ Being included in the family (dogs/humans)
- ▼ Freedom to move
- ▼ Freedom to make choices
- ▼ Ability to control outcomes and get reinforcers
- ▼ Unconditional love and attention
- ▼ Good health: nourishing food, no parasites, etc.
- ▼ Having a safe, quiet place to rest
- ▼ Predictable routines and interactions
- ▼ Getting to do things a dog loves to do

Words by Sarah Owings

Art by Lili Chin

### What empties a dog's cup:



- ▲ Social isolation
- ▲ Long periods of confinement with no enrichment
- ▲ Poor nutrition, untreated illness, or pain
- ▲ Denied access to reinforcers
- ▲ Scary or unpredictable reactions from important humans
- ▲ Over-stimulation (over-exercised) or not enough
- ▲ Set up to fail, and then punished for it
- ▲ No preparation for challenging situations
- ▲ Unclear training: not knowing how to get reinforcement
- ▲ No one responding when expressing a need
- ▲ Too much "impulse control" (i.e. no sniffing, no eating, no exploring, no barking, no doing Dog Things ) for too much of the day

Inspired by THE EMOTIONAL CUP by Upbility