

Texas Veterinary Behavior Services

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ENVIRONMENTAL ENRICHMENT FOR DOGS

When considering the natural behavior of most canines, it is obvious that the average pet dog receives very low levels of environmental stimulation. Most non-domestic animals spend the majority of their time foraging for food. In addition, they must seek out or construct resting areas and avoid predators and other natural hazards. Pet dogs on average spend less than 15 minutes per day eating because they do not have to forage for food. They are kept in static and often monotonous environments. The majority of dog breeds were developed for some functional purpose (guarding, herding, hunting, etc.) yet few dogs actually participate in these activities, leaving them with no outlet for often high levels of energy and stamina.

Insufficient stimulation can cause or exacerbate a number of behavior problems including hyperactivity, destructive chewing, acral lick dermatitis, attention-seeking behavior, compulsive disorders and certain forms of aggression.

Environmental enrichment cannot substitute entirely for providing dogs with outlets for heritable behavior and heavy physical exercise. It can encourage a more normal range of behaviors in the animal and serve to constructively occupy the animal's time and aid in reducing "boredom."

I currently recommend that dogs receive their **entire** daily ration of food during training or from enrichment devices. All enrichment items should be rotated so the animal does not see the same items repeatedly every day. Not all dogs will be able to participate in all the suggestions that follow. Know the dog and its propensity for destroying and/or eating toys. Certain dogs should only get certain toys while under direct supervision.

1. Feed the dog from a Buster Cube or Roll-A-Treat ball.
2. Place dog food or treats inside a cardboard box, old towel/rag, or plastic jugs and allow the dog to tear the item apart to get to the food inside.
3. Scatter food out in the grass in the yard or across the floor in your house to make the dog search for each piece.
4. Stuff Kong toys full of various food items (or the dog's meal) and freeze them overnight before giving them to the dog.
5. Divide portions of the dog's meal into small Tupperware containers and hide them around the house for the dog to find.
6. Place novel scents in the environment using small amounts of spices, herbs, extracts, or synthetic animal scents (e.g. rabbit, quail, squirrel, etc. available from a sporting goods store).
7. Build the dog a sand box either by sectioning off a 4-5 foot square area in your yard or buying a child's wading pool and filling it with sand and dirt.
8. Buy the dog a child's wading pool and fill it with water. If the dog enjoys both water and digging, you can alternate the substrate in the pool each week.
9. Place vegetables or fruits (e.g. melons, apples, lettuce, squash, watermelon, carrots, celery, etc.) out in the yard or you can bury them in the sand box or float them in the wading pool. (Do not give your dog grapes or raisins!)
10. Add sugar-free Kool-Aid, Gatorade powder, or bullion (or other broths) to water and freeze into a popsicle in a variety of sizes of Tupperware. You can add various pieces of food items to these: cereal, fruits, vegetables, dog food, cheese, meat, etc.

11. Hang rope or inner tubes from a branch or other item in the yard for the dog to play tug with.
12. Give the dog old water bottles or milk jugs made of either cardboard or plastic. You can increase the dog's interest by putting food items inside. (Always remove the plastic rings and the plastic caps before allowing dogs to play with these items.) Many dogs will also play with 5-gallon water jugs.
13. Some dogs will play with old tires either loose on the ground or hanging from ropes.
14. Training sessions and other dog sport activities (flyball, agility, tracking, Frisbee, etc.) are also forms of enrichment.
15. Be sure the dog has both toys (e.g. squeakies, rope toys, stuffed animals, rubber toys, balls, etc.) and chewing items (Nylabone, Galileo bones, rawhide bones, etc.). These two types of toys serve different purposes.

Note: Please do not give your dog chocolate, grapes, or raisins as these are toxic to dog