

Suggestions for environmental enrichment for dogs

Sensory enrichment

These might include a radio, television, or DVD, toys that squeak, and foraging devices.

Feeding

Small stashes of food hidden around the home in small containers can stimulate hunting and feeding behavior. Fresh fruit and vegetables can be provided for the pet to gnaw on. Meat, canned food, or other flavorings can be added to water, and then frozen in a plastic container. Cubes of meat or pieces of shrimp (prawns) can be frozen in cups of water. Treats or kibble can be placed in plastic water or soda (soft drink) bottles for the pet to knock around and empty. Food can be scattered on the floor or deck or in the grass in the yard to make the dog search for each piece. A food dispenser that uses a timer to dispense food at intervals can be used to stimulate the dog throughout the day. In fact, instead of feeding from dishes, dogs can work for some or all of their daily food. Pieces of food can be tossed down the hall, up the stairs, in the kennel or around the yard for the dog to chase.

Manipulative toys and objects

A wide variety of toys are available from commercial companies. Many dog chew toys are made of durable rubber and may have grooves or holes where chew products, food, or treats can be stuffed (Figure 4.8). Safety and characteristics of toys that are interesting to the individual pet will determine which toys are appropriate. Toys should not be so small or fragile that they can be chewed and swallowed, nor so hard that a tooth could be broken. There are many toys available that are designed to be stuffed, coated, or filled with food, treats, or chews and require some form of manipulation to dispense the food. Freezing the food in the toys will increase the time the pet spends with it. Other toys are designed to be moved around so that dry food or treats will fall from openings in the toys (Figure 4.9). Rabbit, quail, and other "wildlife scents" (available from sporting goods stores) can be smeared on toys to increase their appeal; however, care should be taken with some dogs that it does not increase predatory instincts. Sturdy, fleece toys that can be grabbed and shaken are very appealing to some dogs and can satisfy a need for predatory play. Squeak toys produce a high-pitched, prey-like noise that appeals to many dogs. Periodically rotating toys in and out of the pet's environment will recharge the novelty of the toys.

Consider feeding most of the daily food from toys. Articles of clothing and household items (such as shoes, old towels, and blankets) should not be used for play as some pets will generalize their chewing to possessions that the owner does not want damaged. Other family possessions that might appeal to the puppy must be kept out of reach.

Play

Retrieving, tug of war, flying discs, or playing games with soccer, hockey, or football toys are enjoyable and stimulating ways for the owner and pet to interact.

Environmental

A doggie door allows the pet to get out during the day. A small wading pool (if supervised by family) can be provided for the dog to splash in. Toys can be buried in a sandbox or a sand-filled digging pit for the dog to dig out. Large plywood boxes and tunnels can be placed in the yard for the dog to crawl through and on top of. A tire or inner tube can be attached to a tree limb for the dog to grab and tug or chew. New environments should periodically be visited with the dog to explore. When opportunities to play and exercise with the family are limited the pet can be taken to day care.

Social

Provide another pet (same or another species) for social interaction and exercise. Visit the pet during lunch breaks. Hire a dog walker. Ask friends and family members to stop by during the day to interact with pet.

Training

There are all types of training that families can do with their pets, many of which they may not be aware. Obedience, flyball, scent, Frisbee, agility, tracking, lure coursing, earthdog trials, weight pulling, herding, musical freestyle dancing, trick and other types of training are activities the pet might enjoy but care should be taken so that the dog is not overstimulated or anxious during classes.