

Enrichment Activities

We humans tend to be chronically over-stimulated – we crave down time. It’s understandably difficult for us to empathize with our dogs, who have the opposite problem. One of the most pervasive and serious - yet invisible - welfare issues for domestic dogs in the developed world is under-stimulation. Dog brains evolved to handle the career-family juggling act of 1) hunting and scavenging for a living and 2) dealing with the social complexities of running into other dogs while hunting and scavenging. A lot of domestic life, safe and secure as it is, flies in the face of this genetic legacy; most dogs are provided with little opportunity to exercise their hunting and scavenging propensities or are punished if they try. They also endure lives of relative solitude from both their human families and from the company of other dogs.

Environmental Enrichment Strategies for Dogs

You can bump up your dog’s mental – and by extension, physical – health with some easy interventions. One is to increase the amount of novel sights, sounds and smells he is exposed to every day. Another is to up his quota of free dog interaction, with the proviso that he and the other parties involved have adequate social skills.

Work-to-Eat

The work-to-eat strategy encompasses training and problem solving. Below are some work-to-eat options.

One of the greatest innovations in the work-to-eat problem-solving category has been the Kong toy (pictured here).

EXAMPLE - Step One: Start with a few clean Kong toys appropriately sized for the largest dog that could access them.

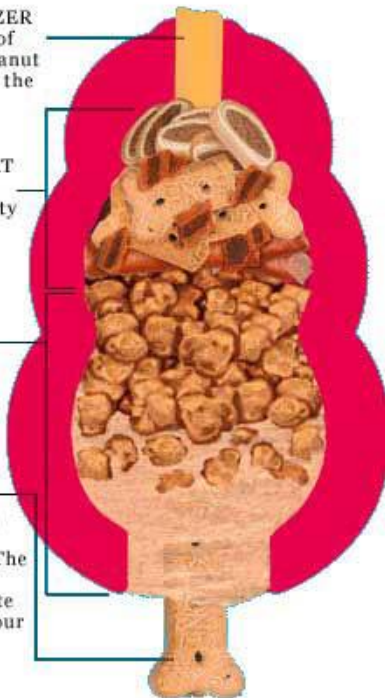
NOTE: Small breeds need medium Kongs for stuffing.

Step Two: TANTALIZER
Place a little morsel of freeze dried liver, peanut butter or cheese into the little hole on top.

Step Three: DESSERT
Fill approximately one-third of the cavity with doggie treats such as biscuits, marrow bites, etc.

Step Four: MAIN COURSE Fill the last two-thirds with canned food or food roll mixed with kibble or food nuggets.

Step Five: APPETIZER Leave a nice tidbit sticking out of the opening. The "easy pickings" will provide an immediate pay off and entice your dog to "get serious" about the job.



Into these robust red (or black, if he’s a Power Chewer) rubber hollow toys can go all manner of dog food and goodies. A nicely executed Kong stuffing job can keep a dog occupied for half an hour or more doing what dogs do so well: solve a problem to get some good eatin’.

Other examples include toys that are meant to hold your dog’s regular portion of food and make them think and work to get the food out.

Some examples include the Buster Cube, Kong Wobbler, and Tricky Treat Ball:



Dog Classes

The value of training here is process, not product. This means that, even if the kinks are out of your dog and he’s obedient enough for you, enroll him in something anyway: tricks classes, advanced obedience, clicker classes or take up a sport such as Agility, Musical Freestyle or Flyball. Remember, it doesn’t matter if he’s not gifted at your chosen activity – it matters that he’s getting out, having a good time and solving some problems.