

//////////////////// The Behavior Department

Enriching a Shelter Dog's Experience

Providing stimulation is easier than it might seem

BY LIZ MARSDEN



**Please please please
give me something
to do ...**

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It's bedtime at my house, and my dogs know it. Their clue isn't the waning hour, or any of the little before-bedtime rituals I go about as the hour gets late. Their tip-off is the clink of a certain white ceramic jar on the kitchen counter, where the Kongs are kept.

Lily the cattle dog immediately dashes upstairs to dive into her crate. Dakota the Lab does a world-class sit/stay without me even glancing in her direction. Forrest, my other cattle dog, who's much more casual about this whole routine, simply chills in his favorite resting place on the hallway rug.

As I take the three minutes required to smear globs of peanut butter into the openings of the hollow rubber toys, the dogs anticipate the apex of their night. They each take their bedtime treats with all the finesse they can muster, then settle down to the task of licking their Kongs so clean of peanut butter that I won't see any of them stir for about a half hour. Then, their palates satiated, they will all go to sleep for the night.

That little, three-minute investment of time that gives my band of pups so much satisfaction is known as environmental enrichment. Kinds of enrichment can

vary, but enrichment of captive animals (and yes, our pet dogs can be considered such) certainly encompasses any housing change, toy/object, or activity that:

- Allows animals to engage in species-appropriate activities
- Relieves stress and boredom
- Improves quality of life
- Decreases destructive behavior and frustration.

In the federal Animal Welfare Act amendments of 1985, two mandates were enacted to improve environmental enrichment for animals in regulated facilities such as laboratories, zoos, etc.:



“ Pizza night: while the large pepperoni came in, I snuck out. ”
-Daisy, American Staffordshire Terrier Mix



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Kong-style toys are great for bored pooches, and the Kong company has a program that provides factory seconds for animal welfare groups.

minimum daily exercise for dogs, and “environmental enhancement to promote the psychological well-being of nonhuman primates.” Progressive zoos and wild animal parks, and even laboratories where animals are used for experimentation, are now employing environmental enrichment for animals other than primates and dogs.

Overwhelmed? We Get It!

As a shelter caregiver and professional dog trainer, the power and importance of enrichment is something I’ve been keenly—often painfully—aware of for as many years as I’ve been involved with dogs. Working in shelters, I’ve seen many a barren cage or crate where dogs were expected to be satisfied with nothing more than barking at the other dogs, pacing, jumping at the sides of their enclosures, waiting patiently for someone to come and let them out, staring into space or sleeping the long hours away. Most

disturbingly, I’ve witnessed the effects of inactivity and isolation—tail-chasing, self-mutilation, aggression, and depression, to name a few.

As much as I hate to see such situations, I know why they happen. Many animal shelters are overwhelmed, underfunded, truly chaotic places where it’s hard to avoid working at least two or three hours of overtime every night if you’re involved in animal care. Someone always needs something. Shelter workers are maxed-out by their daily challenges; at hectic times, dozens of new dogs needing care and triage can arrive daily. Having been there myself, I can sympathize. Yet I still believe shelters can provide dogs with enrichment on a daily basis.

Simple Solutions

Over the years, it’s been fun to collect some incredibly easy ways shelters of any size and budget can add enrichment activities to the dogs’ daily routine. My com-

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It may look like dirty laundry to you, but old towels look like heaven to a dog who loves to shred things.

Enrichment Myth-Busting

There are some common concerns we hear when discussing enrichment with food and recyclables. We've found that most of them are nothing to worry about.

Won't feeding "people food" like peanut butter, cheese, and Spam make dogs beg food from people? Or upset their stomachs?

Luckily, dogs have no idea which food was packaged for people and which was packaged for dogs—it's all just food to them! As long as people don't feed dogs from the table, they won't beg from the table. As for the digestive issues, dogs who have food sensitivities or allergies may have loose stools if given large amounts of "people" food—but we almost never see a problem if these foods are given in small amounts as enrichment.

Won't dogs eat the plastic jars and bottles and get sick?

Plastic peanut butter and water bottles get dented by the most enthusiastic dogs, but we never see them rip off pieces and ingest them. If in doubt, watch the dog before leaving him alone with a bottle, make sure the bottle is appropriate for the size of the dog, and replace old bottles with new ones each day.

Won't dogs get their heads stuck in jars and suffocate?

As long as the mouth of the jar is smaller than the dog's muzzle, this can't happen.

Aren't bones bad for dogs?

Cooked bones can be dangerous due to splintering, but raw or sterilized beef "marrow" bones are extremely safe. The worst that happens is that tiny, harmless bits may get slowly shaved off the ends and pass through the digestive tract. Some bones will eventually crack into two large pieces; they can then be replaced.

Won't dogs learn to destroy towels if given towel "shredding" toys?

The dogs who like to shred fabric will find ways to do it if left without direction. By giving these dogs specific towels (the ones filled with treats!) as an outlet for their chewing preference, the problem of random fabric-chewing can be minimized or even eliminated.

pany, Mission Dog, was founded on these ideas, and its goal is to put these tools into the hands of the many progressive-minded shelter workers who regularly ask themselves: "What more can we do to make shelter life better for our dogs?"

The answer to that question is: More than you might think!

It can be as simple and cost-free as collecting used plastic peanut butter, yogurt, and cream cheese containers and distributing them to the most active, bored dogs in the kennel. Used, rinsed soda or water bottles can become treat-dispensing toys. It's beyond gratifying to place something as simple as an old peanut butter jar in the cage of a pacing, barking 9-month-old Labrador and see him settle right down with his new treasure. Later, you'll see him flipping his new toy (now licked clean) around the kennel, chasing it as it scuttles and bounces.

A trainer friend and colleague never recycles a plastic container or cardboard box without first using it as an enrichment toy for her two dogs, Sweets and Tater. Those lucky dogs perform a perfect sit, then they get to lick the vestiges of cream cheese from the tub, or gravy from the TV dinner tray, or simply wrangle a few kibbles out of a cardboard milk carton before it gets thrown out. My friend knows that she's providing the dogs with a suburban equivalent of two classic dog behaviors: foraging and shredding. It's good to give a dog any chance to simply be more of a dog. And better still, shelters can do these things at little to no cost. Staff and volunteers who normally would throw out that little plastic tray can instead spend a few minutes to prepare a great gift for a bored shelter dog.

Ask and You Shall Receive

For shelters that have donation "wish lists," being specific about some of these items can bring tons of great, durable toys and chewies into your dog kennels. Holiday wish lists are a great way to gather a year's worth of toys that you can use over and over. Our time-tested favorites are hard rubber Kongs, which come in sizes perfect for toy to giant dogs. We held volunteer Kong-stuffing parties and froze the toys with their treats and peanut

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Keep soda bottles out of landfills via a new kind of recycling: Turn them into toys for shelter dogs. By drilling a hole in the bottle—just slightly bigger than a nugget of dog food—and then adding kibble, you get a cheap toy that can busy a pooch for hours.



STEVE LAUME

Liz Marsden is a co-founder of Mission Dog (missiondog.com) which offers personalized (and fun!) workshops, DVDs, and booklets to dog care professionals.

butter filling so they'd be there for staff to distribute on a daily basis.

I'm a vegetarian, but tasty meat bits are still a big motivator for dogs. Hard, sterilized beef "marrow bones" can be stuffed, frozen and reused for months—and you can find free-range bones that are more humane. We found that we could throw all of these toys—bones included—in with our dog laundry and they'd come out good as new. Nylabones are another sturdy, reusable, and washable toy that's perfect for puppies and exuberant chewers of all ages. Kong and Nylabone even have shelter discount programs well worth checking out. (Visit kongcompany.com and click on "Find Kong," then "Kong seconds." For Nylabones, go to nylabone.com/community/donations.htm.)

For Kong and toy stuffing, variety is the spice of life. The little plastic-wrapped string cheese sticks are easy to store and easy to use. Dog treats, kibble, canned food, cream cheese, and other tasty bites can be layered into the toys with peanut butter for stickiness.

Try mobilizing your staff, volunteers, school groups, and visitors to collect and donate used plastic peanut butter jars and water and soda bottles. Have large collection bins in your lobby and kitchen that make it easy for people to remember; an attractive poster on the bins explaining enrichment would be a nice touch!

Getting Creative

For those who want to go further with enrichment, the real fun begins! Here are just a few ideas Mission Dog has collected from shelter wizards:

Doggie Pinata: Get a half- or one-gallon plastic milk jug with a handle. Poke a few holes in the bottom, just slightly larger than the size dog food you plan to put inside it. Hang the jug from a bar above the kennel, using some bungee cords joined together. Watch an active dog play to get his meal.

Towel Shredding Toy: Some dogs just love to rip and shred. If you notice a blanket-shredder in your kennel, don't just remove his bedding privileges (bedding is

enrichment, too!). Why not use some of those old donated towels for a higher purpose? Take a towel and place a few dog biscuits smeared with peanut butter in the middle of the towel. Roll the towel up so it covers the treats well. Knot the towel tightly several times around the treats. The tighter the knots, the better the workout.

Scent Sticks: Plastic PVC pipes from the hardware store can be fitted with removable end caps so that anything smelly can be placed inside, but the dog can't remove the contents. A few small holes drilled along the length of the pipe allow scent to escape. Fillings include things you would normally throw out. A few favorites are used rabbit or guinea pig bedding and, yes, horse, sheep, or cat poop!

Lasting Results

As a trainer, I've seen behavior problems like destructive chewing and "hyperactivity" diminish or disappear with proper enrichment in the form of chew toys and interactive food toys. Giving the dog a job—getting food out of a container or toy—displaces destructive behaviors that have no other constructive outlet. This one form of enrichment alone has been close to miraculous for many of the dogs I've worked with.

I remember Greta, an 8-month-old German shepherd who had developed the habit of compulsively chasing her tail, to the exclusion of interacting with people or playing ball. During a fact-finding conversation with her owner, it became clear that Greta had been spending more and more time crated with nothing to keep her occupied. I suggested that her owner give Greta an interactive food toy every time she was crated, and that she redirect the tail-chasing with some tug-toy chasing whenever it began outside the crate.

Within two weeks, Greta had almost completely stopped chasing her tail, and within a month the behavior had disappeared!

Greta is not alone. Every dog craves enrichment, and it's one of the few things that takes so little time and gives immediate results. I know that Lily, Forrest, and Dakota would vouch for it—if they weren't all fast asleep at my feet. **AS**