

Encouraging enrichment through engagement

What is enrichment?

Animals have natural behaviors and needs, and they must have opportunities to express those behaviors. This is where enrichment comes in, providing enrichment for cats and dogs allows them to express these behaviors. An enriched environment provides an environment in which an animal has variety, choice, and control over their daily activities.

Enrichment in shelter settings is incredibly important for animals. Keeping animals stimulated mentally is as needed as caring for their physical needs. Providing enrichment for animals in shelters can help decrease stress and unwanted behaviors that result from stress. It can also help to decrease illness. Happy and healthy animals are more likely to become adopted and stay in long term homes.

Benefits of enrichment for animals

- Provides needed mental and physical stimulation
- Decreases stress
- Decreases boredom
- Decreases unwanted behaviors such as destructive behavior, anxiety, and inter-cat aggression
- Improves overall quality of life

Benefits of enrichment for shelter and staff

- Improves your shelters image
- Boost staff and volunteer morale
- Happier animals mean happier humans
- An enrichment program can bring in donations and sponsorships

Enrichment examples

Variety is the key to a good enrichment toolkit. When offering enrichment, remember that all animals are individuals and enjoy different things so be sure to review and adjust your enrichment program based on animals' preferences. Almost all enrichment supplies can be donated and/or purchased inexpensively. Some examples listed below.

Auditory enrichment: This can include reading a story, playing bird and nature sounds, and playing music made specifically for cats and dogs (Through a dog's ear, Through a cat's ear, Icalmcat, Icalmdog).

Olfactory enrichment:

Catnip, silvertop, cat grasses, safe houseplants, and pheromones such as Feliway all help encourage exploration and play in cats.

For dogs, offer different types of aromas and allow dogs to sniff while on walks and walk them in different areas

Placing a small amount of a scent in paper ball toys, boxes, bags, etc. can provide sensory enrichment. Switching available scents and presenting them randomly can add surprise and delight to the cat's daily exploration.

Tactile (Touch): Many animals respond positively to touch from humans. This involves petting and brushing. Along with the touch comes social interaction and this practice helps to ensure that these social animals receive the attention they need. Make sure to identify the kind of touch the cat and/or dog appreciates. For example, not all cats like to be held just like all humans do not like to be hugged.

Providing soft bedding and massage are other good examples of tactile enrichment.

Training: Another form of enrichment can be clicker training cats and dogs. Both cats and dogs are intelligent and clicker training is a great way to mentally stimulate and teach them new tricks!

There are many benefits to clicker training, it helps animals be more confident and comfortable in new situations, encourages creativity and initiative, and helps strengthen the human animal bond.

Food based enrichment:

Kong Wobbler, frozen Kongs, and homemade PVC pipe toys for dogs and cats.

Water bottles puzzle toys: Take empty water bottles, remove wrapper, cut a few small to large holes, can leave lid on or off for increasing difficulty for the puzzle toys. Great for dogs or cats but be sure to use appropriately sized bottles

Lunch paper bag/paper bag: put catnip or treats inside. They can explore, pounce, and kill (destroy the bag) It's a great hiding space and a fun toy all at the same time. Also try catnip covered toy mice inside the bag, this satisfies a natural urge to hunt and stalk.

Paper towel roll puzzle toys: cut paper towel roll in half, fold in ends and cut a few small to large holes, place in treats. As cats begin to use these more, cut smaller holes to make it more fun for the cats!

