

Enriching Your Dog's Life

Like us humans, our dogs need both physical exercise and mental enrichment on a daily basis. Lacking either one, dogs can resort to undesirable behaviors. By giving our dogs an opportunity to use their natural instincts, you can improve both their environment and quality of life. Here are a few recommendations to get you started:

Indoor dog pools

Many cities have businesses that offer indoor, heated dog pools. Swimming is a great form of exercise and these spaces allow you to stay inside (and warm!) while a staff person helps your dog to safely acclimate to the pool. Eventually, once they can confidently and safely swim, you can also seek out safe outdoor swimming places for your dog, as well.

Secure, fenced-in spaces

It is important to give your pup the occasional opportunity to stretch their legs off-leash. These spaces should be securely fenced and should not necessarily be dog parks. Some dogs can jump surprisingly high, so we would recommend using a secure, back-clip harness and long line the first time your dog explores these spaces. That way, if your dog does surprise you and jump over the fence, they are unable to run away. Ask a neighbor if you can use their secure, fenced-in yard to let your pup have a romp, or search online for local businesses who have spaces available to rent for individual dog use. Be sure to pack poop bags, a water bowl, a few favorite toys, and enjoy!



Treat-dispensing/puzzle toys

These interactive toys are filled with food and require your dog to engage with them to make the toy dispense the food. They are a great way to get your dog's brain working by challenging them to solve the puzzle. There are a variety of treat-dispensing toys available and they range in level of difficulty. When first introducing your dog to these toys, start with an easy option and build up to the more challenging toys over time. You may need to help your dog figure out what to do with the toys at first. An example of an easier toy is the Kong Wobbler, versus a more challenging dispensing toy such as the Tug-a-Jug which requires more dynamic movements from the dog. Search online and you will find endless options for treat-dispensing and puzzle toys. You can also create your own enrichment toys using everyday household items:

Muffin tin – Take a standard muffin tin and place treats in each divot. Then place a tennis ball on top. Your dog will then have to sniff around the tin and knock the tennis balls off to get the treats out. Have a small dog? Try a mini-muffin tin and mini tennis balls.

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Cardboard box/tube – Take a cardboard box or tube (paper towel or toilet paper tube) and place several treats inside. Close up the box or scrunch the ends of the tube shut. Allow your dog to tear apart the cardboard to get the treats out. This will create a bit of a mess, but the easy cleanup will be worth your dog's enjoyment. With bigger boxes, you can add additional treats or a toy for the dog to find. Be sure to remove any tape or plastic labels on cardboard boxes prior to giving them to your dog.

Treat-dispensing/puzzle toys not only provide your dog with mental enrichment but can also be given in place of food bowls or as an activity while you are away. Consider feeding your dog their meals in a treat dispensing toy. This will keep them occupied longer while they engage with the toy for their meal, and gets both their body and their brain working. It is a great way to provide your dog enrichment in the mornings before work while you are getting ready. You can also leave your dog with an enrichment item to provide mental exercise while you are away. When doing this, make sure the enrichment item is not a choking hazard. As one example, a Kong can be filled with different types of food your dog enjoys (like peanut butter and kibble) then frozen. When you are getting ready to leave, give your dog the frozen Kong. Freezing it will make it more challenging and will keep your dog engaged longer.

Long-term chews as enrichment

Dogs love to chew! You can offer your pup marrow bones, raw bones, bully sticks, frozen Kongs, and many other options to keep them busy and mentally stimulated. When introducing any new treat, make sure your dog is supervised, and be sure to check with your veterinarian first. Worried about your pup's sensitive stomach? Soak his regular kibble in water, add a tablespoon full of something exciting (plain yogurt, canned dog food, boiled chicken), mix well, use that concoction to fill their Kong (or any other puzzle toy), then freeze before serving.

Designated Digging

Digging is another natural behavior for dogs, but is frequently discouraged and unwanted by humans. If your dog enjoys digging, providing them an appropriate place to dig will give them an outlet for that natural desire and provide mental and physical exercise. Create a designated digging area by using a sandbox, kiddie pool, or by building your own. Encourage digging by burying their toys in the box for them to dig up. When beginning this process, make the toys easy to find for your dog. Over time, increase the depth at which the toys are buried. You can begin to use "digging" as a cue over time, thereby training your dog to "go dig" when the time is appropriate.

Nose work

Dogs possess up to 300 million olfactory receptors in their noses, compared to the mere six million we have. In addition, the part of the dog's brain that is devoted to analyzing smells is, proportionally speaking, 40 times greater than ours! Therefore, utilizing a dog's sense of smell is another great way to engage their brain and enrich their lives.

Snuffle mat – The snuffle mat consists of fleece strips tied on to a rubber mat with holes in it. The loose ends of the fleece are on top and provide hiding spots for the treats. This is similar to treat-dispensing toys, as it can be used for feeding meals, but it requires the dog to actively use their nose to hunt out the treats. This is another item

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that can be purchased or made at home. You can also use the grass outside as a natural snuffle mat; drop treats in the grass and allow your dog to sniff around for the yummy morsels.

Decompression walks- Dogs love to explore their environment, but walks on concrete without any opportunity to sniff are not particularly exciting for our dogs. While appropriate leash-walking skills are important, we should also be sure to give them the opportunity to sniff, mark, and enjoy the smells that their daily walks offer them. Want to give your dog a truly exciting experience? Purchase a long lead from your local pet store, take your dog to a quiet park or field and let them explore while you hold onto their lead. Be sure that you do this in a space where they will not be able to reach the road, strangers, other dogs, or otherwise endanger themselves. Fifteen-to-twenty feet of long line to run, explore, sniff, and practice coming when called will go a long way toward wearing out your high-energy dog. To prevent injury, be sure that if your dog is on a long line, it is attached to a secure, back-clip harness and NOT to a collar. See Decompression Walk Handout

Nose work games – There are many nose work games you can play with your dog that require very little training or experience. Check out the link below which will provide instructions on some basic games and how to play them with your dog. <https://www.puppyleaks.com/canine-enrichment/>. Check out your local Canine Nose Work class for a higher level of difficulty for both you and your dog.

Training Classes

Our dogs are incredibly intelligent and love to learn new skills and behaviors. Positive reinforcement group training classes can be a great way to increase your ability to communicate effectively with your dog. The more behaviors your dog understands, the easier it will be for you to redirect unwanted behaviors and ask for more desirable ones. Visit www.wihumane.org and click on the calendar to sign up for a class near you.

Additional resources:

Finding creative ways to enrich your dog's life is beneficial for both you and your pup, with the added benefit of building a positive relationship between you and your companion. If you have additional questions regarding dog enrichment or dog behavior, contact the Wisconsin Humane Society behavior department at asktheexpert@wihumane.org or 414-431-6173.