

Enrichment / Mental Stimulation

In a world where our dogs were originally bred to do jobs all day every day, we have created a new suburban lifestyle that effectively makes them unemployed. This means that they are lacking a fundamental part of their lives.

As humans, we enjoy socialising, hobbies and keeping our brains and bodies active with work and exercise. We take all of these things away from our dogs when we bring them into our homes.

It is important to research our dogs needs and come up with new ways, each day, to enrich their lives. Some dogs will have specific breed traits that need to be addressed. Cross breeds may not share the needs of their relatives so it's important to pay close attention to what our dogs choose to do and enjoy the most. Some dogs love to sniff, some to chase and some to dig. Or all 3! All of these things are normal so we need to create spaces and equipment and interactive toys that can meet our dog's needs.

Some examples of a dog's natural behaviours which need to be provided for include:

- Sniffing
- Ripping
- Digging
- Chasing
- Herding
- Barking

Let's face it when we look at this list, it appears to be all those things that humans don't really like their dogs practising. So it is even more important to remember that this is normal dog behaviour! It is us who view it as unwanted or undesirable. Without outlets for these things, our dogs will find their own way of meeting those needs.



So how can we enrich our dogs lives?

Scent games

When dogs use their nose, a special part of their brain is stimulated. With exercise, the brain pathways that lead to the problem solving section of their brain becomes stronger, and so the problem solving and learning part of their brain gets stronger. It also helps dogs learn to think and learn rather than react and can be very helpful in a behaviour modification plan for fearful or reactive dogs.

Start small;

- Scatter your dog's food over the lawn in a small space and watch them start to use their nose to find it. Increase space as they become more efficient.
- Play games of hiding food for them to find.
- Allow lots of sniffing on walks in different places.
- Bury treats and create ball pits or other objects that can help make sniffing it out a little more interactive.
- Learn about scent work and research new things to try.

Ripping

Some dogs are very good at ripping things. It's so fun and giving them different things to rip will help keep the rest of your home safe.

- Cardboard boxes – Smear pastes (peanut butter, vegemite etc.) and add other salient treats for your dog to get to. You can hide box inside of boxes and put hard treats inside. Allow a place for your dog to destroy.
- Soft toys – so many people don't buy toys because "their dog destroys them". This is important for your dog to do and it needs to. Give them toys that they can destroy daily. You should be supervising to ensure your dog doesn't accidentally ingest anything unwanted.

Chasing

Dogs with a herding or chase drive can very quickly become obsessed and games such as fetch become a real problem. It is important that these games are stimulating their brain and not becoming an outlet for OCD type behaviours.

Signs of chase obsession are;

- Cannot think when ball is present
- Will play for hours and cannot switch off
- Escalation in behaviour when ignored mid game. Could be braking, bouncing at you, repeating ball pick up and toss at you, mouthing etc.

There are lots of things we can do to make this game an opportunity for mental stimulation rather than obsession. For some dogs, this game just isn't appropriate or healthy.

- If your dog loves balls, you can teach a wait and hide balls for them to find.
- You can put useful cues on the play time so they can switch off. Give your dog a start cue and a finish cue.
- Use the game as a reinforcer for behaviour to help your training.

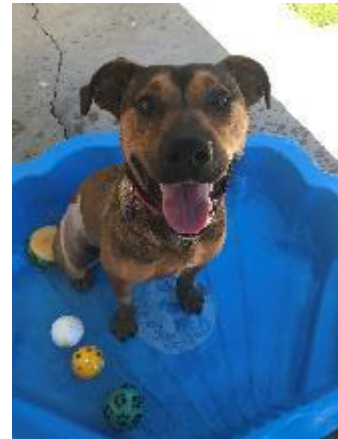
Digging

Digging produces endorphins, so it's just so much fun. Dogs will choose to dig in areas with loose dirt and that are particularly smelly. So garden beds are particularly fun to dig in.

- Block access to areas we don't want digging to occur



- Create a digging space. Shell pools, kiddie sand pits, build your own, section an area in your garden.
- Mimic soft ground and smells and introduce buried treats and toys to encourage digging here.
- Different surfaces/ textures can be great also. Think sand, dirt, hay, balls, water.



Puzzles

meal times are the easiest times to utilise our enrichment. It has been proven that animals prefer to problem solve than be handed their food in a bowl. Of course, all dogs have different skill levels or drives, and often our dogs will need some help learning how to use enriching food items.

- Stuff Kongs with high value treats and research different recipes your dog might like.
- Put some holes in empty bottles and put kibble inside
- Invest in puzzle games and treat balls and rotate them through your dog's feeding schedule.
- Smear soft food or different spreads on lick mats or different surfaces.
- Freeze meals and foods in different containers for your dog to problem solve.

These are just some of the fun activities you can create for your dog. Be proactive with enrichment. Use their meals each day to create a better life for your canine companion and research new ways to keep them stimulated. Our dogs give us so much, it's the least we can do.

