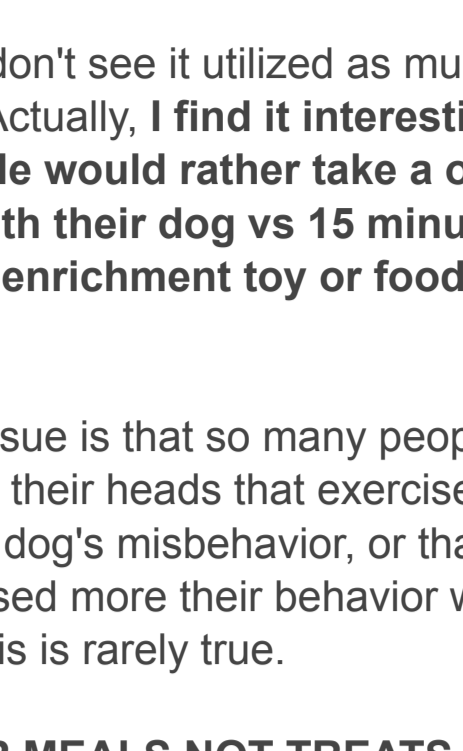


Tuesday, February 5, 2019

Mental Stimulation & Enrichment: What is it anyway & why?!

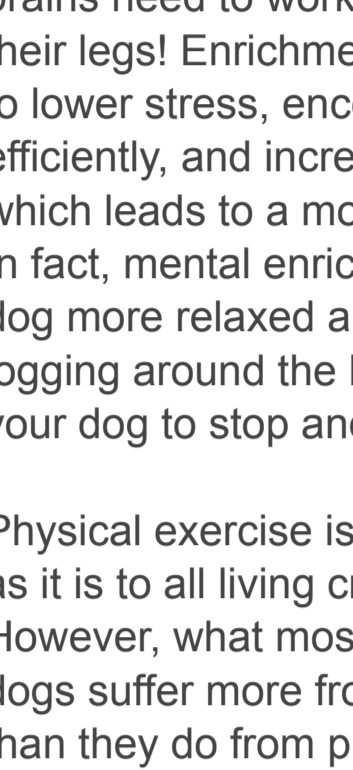


I know my clients hear me talk about this all the time. I also suggest it as a solution to many doggie behavior complaints — because it often is a solution, if not something that would help dramatically!

However, I don't see it utilized as much as it should be. Actually, **I find it interesting how many people would rather take a one hour walk/run with their dog vs 15 minutes to prepare an enrichment toy or food puzzle for said dog.**

I think the issue is that so many people have had it drilled into their heads that exercise is the answer to a dog's misbehavior, or that if they were exercised more their behavior would improve. This is rarely true.

USE IT FOR MEALS NOT TREATS



The #1 thing I hear from clients is this "Oh yeah I stuffed that thing [pointing to their dog's KONG] and he wasn't all that interested." I hear something along those lines as well as clients stating their dog wasn't even remotely interested in the KONG.

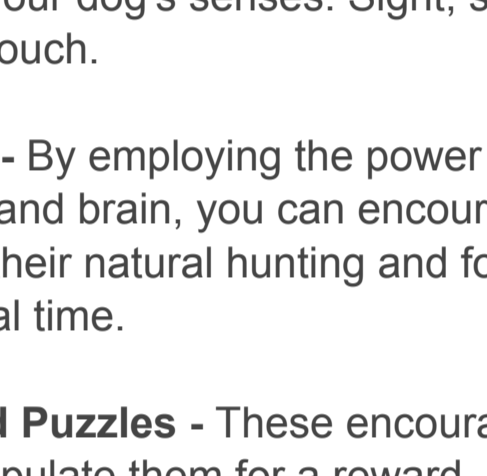
The problem is that the dog knows that the food will be provided in a bowl and he will have easy access to it. If you free-feed your dog (food is out all day, not picked up) this will be even more obvious because your free-fed dog won't work for anything. They have food available at all times. However, if a dog has to work to get his meal he is going to do it or he will know that he won't be getting that meal.

So, I encourage dog owners to provide their dog's meal as a food puzzle, not an extra thing full of treats the dog *might* [or might not!] enjoy. I recommend you feed your dog's entire ration of breakfast, dinner or both out of a entire puzzle so that he has to work to get it!

BENEFICIAL TO ALL DOGS!

Enrichment doesn't just benefit hyper, over-aroused, active and busy dogs — it benefits all dogs! Dogs need enrichment because their brains need to work as much as, if not more than, their legs! Enrichment for dogs has been known to lower stress, encourage them to learn more efficiently, and increases problem solving skills which leads to a more emotionally balanced dog. In fact, mental enrichment is what will make your dog more relaxed and manageable, not 5 miles of jogging around the lake (unless you're allowing your dog to stop and sniff a *lot* during this run!)

Physical exercise is also important to your dogs, as it is to all living creatures (hey, humans too!). However, what most people don't realize is that dogs suffer more from lack of mental stimulation than they do from physical stimulation. **Most people meet, if not exceed, their dog's physical stimulation needs but do not realize that this is not the need that needs to be met the most.**



Dogs actually sleep anywhere from 12-18 hours a day, by nature (puppies and elderly dogs need more sleep than middle aged dogs). If your dog doesn't get enough sleep it's a lot like a child with not enough sleep — if you're a parent then you know what this looks like — it's not fun! As with children, dogs will usually show lack of sleep by acting out or showing behaviors that we definitely don't approve of. While a dog acting out doesn't *always* equate to a dog not getting enough sleep (it could be for a variety of reasons), I'm saying that a dog without enough sleep will definitely show some behaviors that are undesirable. Exercising to the point of exhaustion or not having your dog sleep enough will cause more problems than give the dog a reason to nap.

Dogs need to use their brains, legs and their comfy beds in order to be mentally and emotionally balanced — and exhausted. More sleep actually makes for a calmer dog. So be sure your dog gets a very balanced day of sleep, exercise, enrichment and more sleep.

WHAT EXACTLY IS ENRICHMENT & MENTAL STIMULATION?

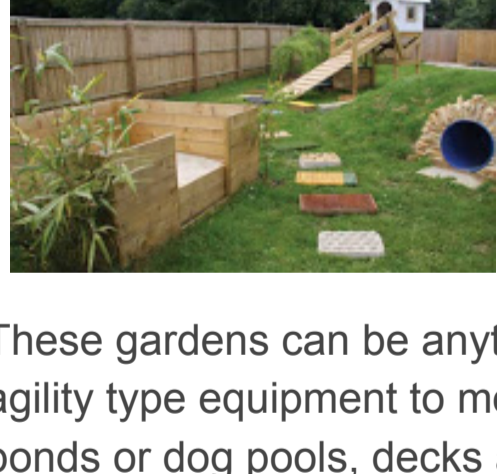
One standard definition of enrichment is: **"Additions to an animal's environment with which the animal voluntarily interacts and, as a result, experiences improved physical and/or psychological health."**

There are a lot of things that involve enrichment to fulfill your dog's mental stimulation needs everyday. They can range from somewhat simple to more complex. You should provide a variety of these to keep your dog's needs met. Don't always opt for the easy ones and don't always opt for the more challenging ones. If you stick to one or the other your dog may become frustrated due to boredom if too simple or due to not being able to solve the more difficult challenges. So be sure to stay on a sliding scale of difficulty.

Enrichment can be divided into six categories:

- 1. Sensory** - This includes anything that stimulates your dog's senses. Sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch.
- 2. Feeding** - By employing the power of your dog's nose and brain, you can encourage your dog to use their natural hunting and foraging skills at meal time.
- 3. Toys and Puzzles** - These encourage your dog to manipulate them for a reward. The reward is usually food or treats, but could also include plush, rubber, rope, and fetch toys.
- 4. Environmental** - Adding new things to your dog's life can sometimes increase their physical activity and make things more interesting. Try adding a mirror to a room in your house, build a ramp in the backyard, or go for a hike in a new place.
- 5. Social** - Interaction with other people and other dogs builds self confidence and trust. Visiting the pet store, the dog park, or even a friend's house *while practicing* training and skills can help keep your dog well-rounded.
- 6. Training** - Training can help strengthen the bond you have with your dog. It helps to build trust plus your dog will learn basic and important listening skills.

HERE IS A LIST OF GREAT ENRICHMENT IDEAS:

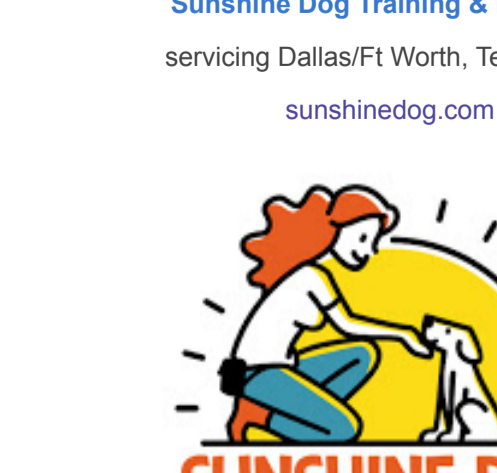


- The dog's sniffer!** I think that the absolute best type of mental enrichment is the type that involves your dog utilizing his nose to find food — I mean real sniffing and searching! I cannot stress how much this will wear your dog out. This type of enrichment far exceeds any type of physical exercise you could provide for your dog — by leaps and bounds.

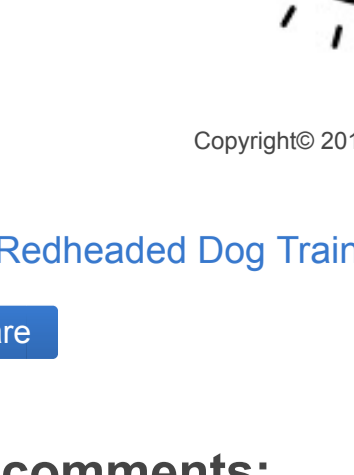


- Fun with surfaces!** Offer a variety of surfaces and textures for your dog to explore, train on and discover. This is especially beneficial to puppies from the time they start walking to the time they are around 14-18 weeks of age. This helps puppies not be afraid of different obstacles, surfaces and textures.

- Sensory Gardens!** You can make your own backyard tons of fun. There are loads of ideas online for sensory gardens and fun for your yard to really make your dog have a fun and enriching space. [Here is a great article](#) on how to **do your own sensory garden**. [Here](#) is a guy who made his Huskies some **great sensory and fun in his yard**.



- Enrichment walks/hikes.** Taking your dog out for walking is boring, if you really think about it. Most of the time people are making their dog walk in a straight line, no room for going anywhere to sniff or be a dog. Make the walk truly beneficial — let your dog sniff, a lot! As I stated above when discussing using their sniffer — when dogs are able to use their noses it's so incredibly rewarding as well as mentally stimulating for them.



Let them use their noses on walks whether in nature (hiking, exploring), in your neighborhood (sniff mailboxes, lawns) or in the city (sidewalks, benches, etc.). Dogs need to sniff! I have my dogs on cue to let them know they can now go to the end of their leash so that we are still practicing leash manners. So you can do this too so that your leash manners still stay intact. I say "Ok you're free to go!" then they go to the end and sniff away!

The above are just a list of a few ways to give your dog mental stimulation and enrichment. You can be creative and have fun with it. Your dog will thank you for it! There are also a lot of fun DIY ideas on [Pinterest](#) that I've [posted to my board](#).

Remember to get a balanced, tired and calm dog you want to provide all of the above and do not leave out the component of sleep — plenty of it too! If you give too much of one and not the other you'll likely see some behaviors that you don't like in your dog! When in doubt, always get in touch with a qualified, professional trainer in your area.

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The Redheaded Dog Trainer at 2:44:00 PM

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