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Enrichment & Kong Stuffing

Providing dogs with outlets for their natural behaviors is not only enjoyable, but crucial to their well-being. There has been a recent explosion of enrichment product and ideas. And with a little creativity, you can make your own on any budget!

Work-to-Eat and Puzzle Toys

Work-to-eat toys come in many forms, from stuffable Kongs to Nina Ottoson puzzle toys.

Dogs actually enjoy working for their food so it is an option to use these toys both for extras and for entire meal rations. For kibble-fed dogs, the best options are the Planet Dog Snoop, Petsafe Tug-A-Jug and OmegaPaw Treat Ball.

Plush Toys and Tug Toys

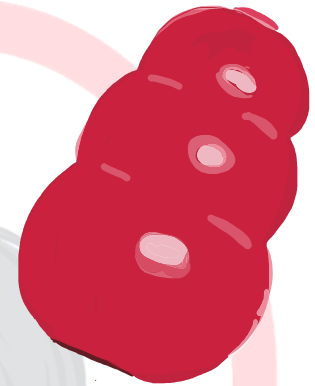
Plush toys and tug toys allow dogs the chance to engage in the behaviors of chasing, catching and dissecting prey. Though many people find this distasteful, this “software” is already installed in many dogs, so giving them a legal outlet to release these behaviors increases behavioral wellness and burns energy. Rules for tug games can be easily established, and give us the opportunity to build in some impulse control at the same time.



Scent Games

Dogs’ noses are truly incredible. Put your dog’s nose to work by “scatter feeding” him. Hide kibble and treats throughout the house, throw it in the grass in the yard, or put it under one of several boxes. Sports like K9 Nosework are great fun, teaching your dog to discriminate and identify odors in order to be rewarded.

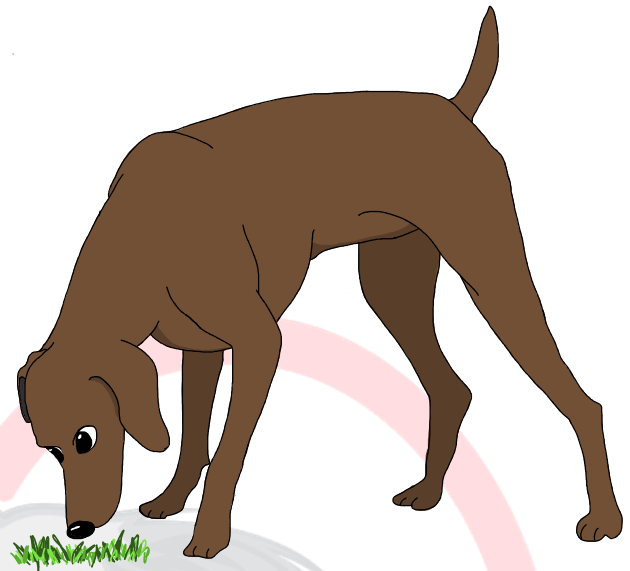
While we are talking about noses, don’t forget the value of letting your dog sniff on walks. Dogs love going on “sniffari”: checking out the neighborhood with their noses. Bushes, lampposts, mailboxes and meeting other dogs are vital ways for dogs to enjoy their



“dogness.” Allowing dogs the chance to explore the world with their powerful olfactory sense is one of the most enriching activities we can provide.

Nylon Bones, Antlers and Chew Objects

Chewing is a very natural behavior for dogs. Chewing of inappropriate objects is one of the most common complaints brought to trainers. Luckily, there are now many chew toy options on the market, from synthetics like nylon bones to organics such as bully sticks, raw or smoked bones and antlers. Speak to your veterinarian to find out which are safe for your dog, and then explore which textures, shapes and tastes your dog most likes.



DIY options

Enrichment needn't be expensive. You can make simple toys for your dog at home. Sprinkle treats into drink trays and then cover with tennis balls. Make “snuffle mats” with strips of fleece or tee shirts laced into a rubber mat. Then sprinkle with kibble. The humble tennis ball takes on new life when wrapped in an old sock. Tug toys can be made from strips of old tee shirts. For extra fun, insert hard treats between the braids!

Thinking of enrichment as not something “extra” we provide for our dogs, but as a necessary part of their mental health, reduces behavior problems, relinquishment to shelters, and improves dog quality of life.

Kong Stuffing

We humans tend to be chronically over-stimulated—we crave down time. It's understandably difficult for us to empathize with our dogs, who have the opposite problem. One of the most pervasive and serious welfare issues for dogs is under-stimulation. Dog brains evolved to handle the juggling act of 1) hunting and scavenging for a living and 2) dealing with the social complexities of running into other dogs while hunting and scavenging. A lot of domestic life, safe and secure as it is, flies in the face of this genetic legacy; most dogs have little opportunity to exercise their hunting and scavenging propensities or are punished if they try. They also endure lives of relative solitude from both their human families and from the company of other dogs.

Environmental Enrichment Strategies for Dogs

You can bump up your dog's mental—and by extension, physical—health with some easy interventions. One is to increase the amount of novel sights, sounds and smells he is exposed to every day. Another is to up his quota of free dog interaction, with the proviso that he and the other parties involved have adequate social skills.

A third way is work-to-eat. The work-to-eat strategy encompasses training and problem solving. The value of training here is process, not product. This means that, even if the kinks are out of your dog and he's obedient enough for you, enroll him in something anyway: tricks classes, advanced obedience, clicker classes or take up a sport such as Agility, Musical Freestyle or Flyball. Remember, it doesn't matter if he's not gifted at your chosen activity—it matters that he's getting out, having a good time and solving some problems.

One of the greatest innovations in the work-to-eat problem-solving category is the Kong toy. Into these robust red (or black, if he's a Power Chewer) rubber hollow toys can go all manner of dog food and goodies. A nicely stuffed Kong can keep a dog occupied for half an hour or more doing what dogs do so well: solving a problem to get some food. In fact, you can give him all of his food this way, especially if he is a particularly "busy" dog. Here are the basics and a few of the finer points of the art of Kong stuffing.



Kong Stuffing Principles and Pointers

Many people's Kong stuffing efforts consist of inserting a few dog cookies. This is scratching the surface of the creative food acquisition challenges you can cook up for your dog. To bump your Kong stuffing prowess up to the next level, follow these suggestions.

1. Make the difficulty level of the Kong appropriate to the dog's level of experience and temperament—is he persevering or a "giver-upper"? Any increases in level of difficulty should be done in small increments, so the dog succeeds while developing perseverance. In other words, start easy—then make it tougher gradually.
 - Easy stuffings are loose and incorporate only small, easy-to-fall-out pieces.
 - More difficult stuffings are tighter with pieces that take concerted effort and hole-manipulation (to the point of vice-grip style squeezing) to get in (and get out!).
2. Employ a matrix (like peanut butter, spreadable cheese, canned food, or toddler food) to hold the smaller bits in and give the dog side-polishing challenges. Stuff cheese cubes in and then microwave it briefly to nicely coat the insides.
3. Hide stuffed Kongs around the house so the dog has to hunt around to find them before unpacking them.
4. Clean your Kongs regularly with a bottle brush and/or in the dishwasher.

Recipe Suggestions

Kongsicle

Stuff meat and mashed potatoes in and freeze, or plug the small hole with peanut butter and fill the cavity with broth, then freeze. (Note: this can be messy—best to give it to your dog outside!). Freeze unsweetened applesauce with banana or carrot bits for low-calorie options.

Archeology Kong

Pack the ingredients as tightly as possible. The last item in should be a dried apple or piece of ravioli, presenting a smooth “finish” under the main hole.

- Layer 1 (deepest): roasted unsalted cashews, freeze dried liver bits
- Layer 2: dog kibble, cookies or Liver Biscotti, Cheerios, sugar-free/salt-free peanut butter, dried banana chips
- Layer 3: baby carrot stick(s), turkey and/or leftover ravioli or tortellini, dried apples

Archeology “Lite”

For cashews, substitute crumbled rice cake; for freeze-dried liver, substitute baked tofu; for peanut butter, substitute fat-free cream cheese.

Super-Pro Kong with Veggies

This recipe is super-pro in the sense that it’s pretty advanced, as well as in the sense of being very high protein, and so may not be suitable for dogs on ultra-low protein diets.

- Jam in as large a piece of fresh, raw stewing beef as possible—this may take a fair amount of wrestling but it’s worth it to get a bigger chunk in. Variation for raw diet feeders: employ chicken wing pieces in place of beef cube.
- Completely plug the small hole with peanut butter or spread-able cheese.
- Grind a combination of carrots and broccoli in a food processor (finely grated would do but really finely ground is better).
- Add pulped up veggies to Kong around and over beef chunk.
- Pour in a little chilled beef or chicken broth as matrix—low sodium is best (keep broth-filled Kong inverted on a glass to prevent spillage during prep).
- Freeze in inverted position until solid (3+ hours).
- Best enjoyed outside or in easy-to-clean area in case of soup drips and spillage—to use indoors, omit broth.

Caesar Kong

Toss together ½ cup ground baby greens, ½ can water-packed sardines, ¼ cup Caesar croutons and 1 teaspoon Caesar salad dressing. Stuff tightly and finish with a small piece of Parmesan cheese. Optional: pine nuts and a hard-boiled egg.