

## BEHAVIORAL ENRICHMENT FOR DOGS

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Enrichment programs are beneficial for reducing canine stress in shelters. Reducing stress potentially also reduces morbidity associated with infectious diseases, as improved behavioral health also improves immune system function. Because enrichment programs are often inappropriately considered “luxury” items in most shelters, this article will place emphasis on examples of enrichment that have been demonstrated as useful via research studies and/or are innovative ideas.

### ENRICHMENT METHODS

- **Visual enrichment** includes viewing conspecifics, other species (especially humans and prey species), themselves (mirrors), the outdoors, and television monitors.
- **Auditory enrichment** includes music and vocalizations of other animals and humans.
- **Olfactory enrichment** includes pheromones, herbs, and smells of conspecifics, other species, food, and the outdoors.
- **Tactile enrichment** includes petting, grooming (by humans and conspecifics), and surfaces to roll upon/rub against.
- **Physical enrichment** includes aerobic exercise (with humans or conspecifics), and provision of items that encourage the dog to interact with them (eg, food-dispensing toys, chew toys).
- **Mental enrichment** includes items/activities that involve “thinking” such as positive reinforcement training, food-dispensing toys, clicker training, and observing the outdoors or television monitors.
- **Social enrichment** includes contact with humans and conspecifics (and rarely, other species).

### CONSIDERATIONS FOR ENRICHMENT PROGRAMS

When considering an enrichment method, several factors should be taken into consideration:

- How much time will it take to implement it?
- Will this be a valuable enrichment tool for some dogs, or ALL dogs? For example, contact with other dogs is enriching for some dogs, but very stressful for others.
- What barriers exist to implementation (eg, toys falling into kennel drains)?
- How much will it cost to implement and maintain it?
- Who will implement it (and will they be able to)?
- How will it improve the dog’s welfare?
- How can we demonstrate its efficacy and thus justify it?

## EXAMPLE: PROTOCOL AND OUTLINE OF FOOD-DISPENSING TOY ENRICHMENT PLAN

### The Plan

Each dog should receive an appropriately sized food-dispensing toy, filled with dry food, a minimum of three times daily. Some dogs will not have been exposed to food dispensing toys previously. These dogs will be placed on a list, and interacted with (with the toy) daily, in an effort to teach the dog how to utilize the toy. If the dog is still not eating food out of the toy after a week, the enrichment device should be discontinued (and noted in the record)

### Time

This enrichment device will not utilize staff time: feeding, feeding, and washing of toys will be performed by volunteers.

### Barriers to Implementation

Although once functioning, the plan will be carried out by volunteers, initially behavior staff must be available for questions and oversight. Drainage systems in kennels must be evaluated to make certain that the toys will not fall into the drains. Food-dispensing toys should not be given to dogs that are co-housed. A disinfection protocol will need to be followed to ensure that the enrichment device does not spread infectious diseases.

### Financial Barriers

Based upon the size of our shelter, it will cost approximately \$500 to buy the food-dispensing toys.

### How it Will Improve Welfare

Feeding enrichment serves as a form of mental stimulation and encourages foraging and interactive behaviors.

### Implementation

The plan will be instituted and supervised by the volunteer coordinator and behaviorist, who will supervise efforts to observe the behavior of the dogs to determine whether the devices are utilized and interview staff and volunteers to ensure that time required for the enrichment device was not under- or overestimated, and that there are no significant concerns with the implementation.

Developing a plan for instituting enrichment will alert senior shelter staff and board members to the pros and cons of the program, and most importantly, demonstrate that the shelter is committed to ensuring that the enrichment plan is something that truly enriches a pet’s environment.

### CONCLUSION

While behavioral enrichment is considered a “luxury item” in many shelters, its value in improving the lives of shelter pets and the morale of staff and volunteers should not be underestimated. In addition, happy shelter pets encourage adopters to spend time at the shelter and encourage their friends to visit the shelter. Thus, it is

important to also consider the potential intangible results of an enrichment program. When starting a program, it is best to start with additions which require the least amount of time/cost, have the least number of barriers to implementation, and the most potential benefit in terms of improving welfare. Shelters should start with ONE

enrichment tool. If that is successful, you can add programs. It is much easier to slowly add to a behavioral enrichment program than to be overwhelmed (and unsuccessful) by attempting to introduce too many changes at once.