



Providing Enrichment to Improve the Mental Health of Dogs

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So often, we only focus on the physical health of the dog, proper nutrition, exercise, physical exams, vaccines, bloodwork, etc. We often fail to recognize the importance of mental health in our dogs. As a Registered Veterinary Technician and Certified Professional Dog Trainer, I often see behavior problems that could have been prevented, avoided or improved if the dog received more mental stimulation.

If you are not familiar with behavior and training, this may be a foreign concept for you. Sometimes, the thought of providing mental stimulation to a dog may seem overwhelming or daunting, but, it does not have to be! Providing mental stimulation can be easy and there are products you can purchase or there are things you can make at home for very little money.

Dog toys are a great way to feed and entertain your dog. Dogs need mental stimulation as much as they need physical exercise, but sometimes, they get bored with regular dog toys. When they play with a food toy, they are getting reinforced (when they get a piece of food) for playing with the toy, therefore, the play often lasts longer. Some food toys also not only provide mental stimulation but physical exercise too because the dog pushes the toys around the house and/ or yard. The down side of some of these food toys is that they can get expensive, however, some of the best food toys are homemade and can be far less expensive.

One of my pets favorite food toys for the summer is the giant ice cube. The giant ice cube is very easy to make and can be used for

dogs that have special diets. All you need to do is fill a plastic bowl with water or broth (any broth will work - chicken, beef, vegetable) then add food or treats to the liquid. I like to add kibble, dog treats, a spoonful of peanut butter, carrots or anything else my dog loves. Sometimes, I will also stuff a Kong and place the stuffed Kong into the liquid. Once I have placed the food and treats in the liquid, I will freeze it (it usually takes up to 24 hours depending on the size of your bowl). Once it is frozen, I take the giant ice cube outside, remove it from the bowl and then put in on the grass in my backyard. Dogs will lick and chew the ice to get to the food and, sometimes, they will even push the ice cube around the yard to try to find a "good treat".

Another homemade food toy I like uses a plastic water or soda bottle (make sure to rinse the bottle out beforehand). Depending on the size of the dog, I will use a small or large bottle. First, I cut holes on the sides and take the cap off. Next, I fill the bottle with kibble (sometimes I put a few special treats in too). Once the bottle is filled, I let my dog push the bottle around the house and/or yard. As they push the bottle, kibble and treats will fall out for them to eat. This is a great homemade toy for mental and physical exercise. Most importantly, as with every toy, make sure your dog does not chew or eat the bottle. If this is the case, this toy is not a good fit for your dog.

Not all mental stimulation has to come from a toy. Sometimes, I will do an "Easter egg" hunt for my dogs. Instead of hiding Easter eggs, I will hide kibble and treats around my back yard and/or house. My dogs will spend hours looking for a treat that may have been left behind. This is another great way to stimulate your dog both mentally and physically especially if they will be left alone for a few hours.

If you are not very crafty and want to purchase a food dispensing toy for your dog, I really like products that are made by KONG. The KONG company makes a "Classic Kong" that can be stuffed with peanut butter, canned pumpkin, dog food (canned and dry) or any other combination of healthy food that the dog enjoys. The KONG company also makes a toy called the "Kong Wobbler" which can be filled with kibble or treats and the dog must push the toy around in order to get the food out of it. Another good toy when using kibble is the "Kibble Nibble Ball". It can be filled with kibble or treats and the dog pushes the ball to get the food out. There are literally hundreds of food dispensing toys and puzzles available, you can look online for more ideas!

We all want our dogs to be happy and healthy. By enriching your dog's mind and body with mental and physical exercise, you are enriching their lives. Give it a try, your dog will love you for it!