

Dog Enrichment

Looking for some ways to keep your dog happy, healthy, and busy? If so, try adding in a few mentally stimulating canine enrichment games & activities to your dog's daily routine.

Mental stimulation enriches our dogs lives by giving them something meaningful and challenging to do. And because these activities alleviate boredom, they decrease the likelihood of our dogs developing behavioral issues such as excessive chewing or barking.

The Benefits of Canine Enrichment Games

We have all heard that a “tired dog is a good dog,” and for the most part it's true — if I play a 10-minute game of frisbee with my dog she will get tired. But after 20 minutes? She is up and ready to go again.

That is pretty much the story of raising most social dogs. I kept adding more and more physical exercise in hopes of tiring her out, yet she kept bouncing back and waiting for more.

Then one day I happened to try something different — instead of just adding more physical exercise to her routine I added in a few short brain games such as “find the treats” and hide and seek. And you know what? It made a huge difference.

Rather than bugging me every 20 minutes for more things to do she started settling down for an hour or two at a time. Turns out finding the right balance of physical and mental exercise for your dog makes a world of difference

So, if you are looking for a way to help keep your dog happy, busy, and entertained throughout the day add in a few activities that stimulate their mind aka canine enrichment games. Not sure where to begin? We have got your covered. Here's several canine enrichment games & activities.

Snuffle Mats

If you are wondering what the heck a snuffle mat is, you are not alone.

A snuffle mat is basically a rubber mat with lots of fabric strips (usually fleece) tied to it. They are designed to mimic grass, and they are used to give your dog a fun yet challenging way to sniff out food and treats. They encourage your dog to use their natural sniffing and scavenging abilities, and they are a fun way to have your dog work for their food.

If you are not convinced that your dog will love sniffing out treats, there is a simple way to gauge their interest — try hiding some treats in a rolled-up towel. Put it on the floor in front of your dog and encourage them to “find the treats,” and praise them every time they find one. If your dog enjoys the towel game, they will also enjoy a snuffle mat.



So how do you get a snuffle mat? You can make a snuffle mat of your own with a rubber mat and fleece. If you are not the crafty type (like me) they are also available from Amazon.

Stuffed Kongs

Stuffed Kongs are one of the easiest ways to keep your dog mentally stimulated and entertained with minimal effort. It is as simple as filling it up with treats in the evening and letting it freeze overnight.

The next day you have got an interactive toy that should keep your dog busy for at least 20 minutes. (will be much longer depending on how much you fill it up, and how much of a pro your dog is using food dispensing toys).

Not sure what to use for Kong stuffing? I prefer using peanut butter or sodium free broth for the “base,” and then adding in some healthy treats such as chopped up carrots or apple slices. If you are not sure what to use check out our list of 39 healthy treats to stuff in a Kong.



I recommend Kongs because they are dishwasher safe (easy to clean) and pretty tough. If you are not a fan of Kong toys check out the West Paw Tux toy — it’s our favorite alternative. It is just as tough and easy to clean, but it is much smaller.

DIY Obstacle Course

If you have ever watched canine agility trials, you know one thing for sure — those dogs are getting a great mental and physical workout.

Teaching your dog something new, such as jumping over a pole or weaving through an obstacle is quite a mental workout for them. And the best part of it is you can do these activities at home — including some mini obstacles in your living room.

You can use a blanket, some dog toys, and a few little orange hazard cones to make your own obstacle course.

You can use your creativity here. Want to teach your dog to jump over something? Prop up a broomstick with some books on either side. Want to teach your dog to bring you something specific? Teach them the names of a few toys and have them “bring you red bird.” Want to teach your dog to weave? Have them walk through objects you place on the ground. (you can also teach your dog to weave through your legs)

Use items that you have already got on hand, and work on teaching your dog to use them in specific ways. In other words, create your own obstacle course for your dog. The benefit of putting these obstacles together like this is that it is a really big mental workout for your dog. You are not just asking them to do one thing, you are asking them to do one thing after another.



39 HEALTHY TREATS you can stuff in a kong

Apples	Cheese	Pumpkin
Applesauce	Cottage Cheese	Rice
Asparagus	Cucumber	Rutabaga
Baby Food	Eggs	Salmon
Bananas	Flax Seeds	Spinach
Blackberries	Green Beans	Squash
Blueberries	Honey	Steak
Broccoli	Kale	Strawberries
Brussels Sprouts	Oatmeal	Snap Peas
Cantaloupe	Oranges	Sweet Potato
Carrots	Peanut Butter	Watermelon
Cauliflower	Peas	Yogurt
Celery	Pineapple	Zucchini

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Food Dispensing Toys

Another fun canine enrichment activity for dogs is using food dispensing toys. A food dispensing toy is any toy that can be used to place food inside of, and one that requires your dog to engage with it to obtain that food. As with other food related games they give your dog a chance to use some of their natural scavenging abilities in a fun and challenging way.

To use a food dispensing toy, you simply fill it up with some treats/food and encourage your dog to engage with it. Most of them have holes that the food will come out of as your dog starts to move it around. If the treats coming out are not enough to keep your dog's interest keep up the praise — let them know how awesome they are by using it.

It may seem weird to have your dog “work” for their food but remember that to them it is natural. In the wild their ancestors had to hunt and scavenge for their meals. Using a food dispensing toy mimics those instincts and gives your dog an opportunity to use their natural abilities.

There is plenty of DIY options as well; you can make your own out of an old plastic container, bottle, or PVC.



Nose Work Games

They are great for keeping your dog mentally stimulated, and they help your dog hone in on their natural sniffing abilities. And the best part? The only thing you need to get started is some treats.

A good game to start with is called the “which hand” game. Grab a couple of treats and have your dog sit in front of you. Let them watch you as you place one treat in one of your hands. Extend both of your hands out with closed fists and ask them to pick “which hand.” If your dog gets it right away and signals to the correct hand open up your fist and let them have the treat. If they choose the wrong hand open up your fist to show them the treat isn't there and ask them “which hand” again.



At first your dog may be relying on visual cues, but after a few rounds they should be able to start figuring out that they can smell it in your hand as well.

Another nose work game is called “go find it.” I'll chop up a carrot or two into small bits and hide them throughout the house. You can use any treat you like, but when you're first starting out we recommend sticking to something smelly to make it a bit easier on your dog. And if you've never done any nose work games before, start with some easy spots that are in plain view.

Frozen Dog Treats

When it comes to canine enrichment it does not get any simpler than using frozen dog treats. They are easy to make, and they will keep your dog busy for quite some time.

The only downside is that they are seasonal. They are not always a great choice for indoor use (they can be quite messy) — so for those of us that have cold winters they may not be a great option all year round. I still use them in the winter but encourage your dog to eat them in the kitchen (a room without carpet) for easy cleanup.

Most frozen dog treats are made with a “base” of yogurt, peanut butter or pumpkin puree. You then fill up an ice cube tray or bundt cake pan with the base and put it in the freezer overnight. The next day you have got a yummy, frozen dog treat for your dog to enjoy.

Giving your dog a frozen treat may seem overly simple, but do not underestimate the amount of effort it’s going to take for your dog to finish it. They are mentally stimulating, and they’ll keep your dog busy and engaged for a long time.

Not sure what treat to make for your dog? Some of my favorite frozen dog treats include watermelon pupsicles, banana pup pops, frozen watermelon treats, frozen apple treats and the pb & ice fruit treat.



Give Your Place a Dog to Dig

Does your dog love to dig? If so you’re not alone. Digging is a natural canine behavior that they enjoy, yet it’s one we don’t often encourage because we don’t want them to dig up our entire garden. For this there is a rather simple solution — give your dog a designated place to dig.

If your dog likes to dig there is a way to let your them do it without having to worry about your tulips — give them a designated digging area or box to use. A designated digging area will allow your dog to dig in a controlled environment. You can use a sandbox, a certain area of your yard, or if you’re handy you can make one of your own.



Encourage your dog to use it by burying one of their toys, or by digging yourself to show them how it’s done. I don’t know about your dog, but if you dig at anything with your hands your dog will gladly join in. Praise them when they use their designated digging area, and pair it with a phrase such as “go dig.” After a few sessions your dog will know exactly what “go dig” means, and where they’re expected to do it.

Puzzle Toys

Puzzle toys are an easy way to keep your dog entertained. And since they are interactive they’ll keep your dog focused on a specific task, giving them plenty of mental stimulation.

We love puzzle toys because they give your dog a chance to use some of her natural problem solving abilities. Watching their enthusiasm as they figure out how to solve it is contagious.



Now keep in mind not all puzzle toys are loved equally by all dogs, and not all of them take a long time to solve. A frozen Kong will keep a dog busy for 30+ minutes, while a simple puzzle toy will only last 1 minute. If you’re not sure how long a puzzle toy will keep you dog busy (or how much they’ll enjoy it) I suggest making one out of a muffin tin & tennis balls to gauge their interest and skill level. (if you’re crafty this DIY bottle game is another great option).



If they solve it right away by knocking the whole thing over, you might want to opt for a more complicated puzzle that has multiple solutions. They come in a wide variety — from single layer puzzles that lay flat on the floor (generally easier to solve), to ones with multiple layers and treat hiding spots that take longer to solve.

LickiMats are also a perfect enrichment item! LickiMat helps calm and soothe your pet by helping release endorphins through the promotion of licking. This Licking Mat is a safe Alternative for your dog to lick. Great for stressful times such vet visits, bath time, nail clipping, injury recovery as well as thunderstorms and fireworks.



“10 Canine Enrichment Games & Activities.” Puppy Leaks, 1 Feb. 2018, www.puppyleaks.com/canine-enrichment/