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Enrichment - the keys to preventing problem behaviors

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Most dogs are bored. Today's pups spend a lot of time waiting for their people to come home from work, wandering around the backyard smelling the same old things, and being couch-potatoes. No wonder they're taking up hobbies like routing through the trash and counter-surfing!

In addition to regular physical exercise, your dog needs something to keep his mind occupied and engaged. You can increase the level of enrichment in your dog's world by making a few simple changes to your walks, playing interactive games, using food dispensing toys, or doing a few micro-training sessions throughout the day.

Give these ideas a try!

- **Go on a sniff-walk.** The goal of a sniff-walk is not to get from point A to point B. Instead, you'll go outside and just let Rover put his nose to the ground and sniff to his heart's content. Dogs take in the world and understand it through their senses of smell. Just 10 or 15 minutes of exploring the environment with his nose can be really satisfying and tiring for your dog because so much of his brain is dedicated to processing scent. So, every day or two (or as a portion of every walk) let your dog direct the walk and smell whatever catches his fancy.
- **Take walks in lots of new places.** Switch up your route or get in the car and head to a park or local hiking trail that you don't usually visit. The same 30-minute walk is much more exciting and tiring for Rover if he has brand new things to look at, listen to, and smell.
- **Feed your dog his meals out of interactive food toys.** There's no reason kibble has to be delivered in a bowl. You can turn Rover's twice daily feedings from 30 seconds of food inhalation into 20 minutes or an hour of problem solving. Start with easy toys – like loose kibble in a Kong – so that your dog doesn't get frustrated.

As he gets savvier, you can increase the difficulty with toys like the Kong Wobbler, the Buster Cube, the IQ Treatball, the Tug-a-Jug, the Tornado by Nina

Ottosson, or a wide variety of other toys available at big-box stores, independent pet supply stores, and online outlets such as Amazon.com.

- **My favorite way to give my dogs their meals** is to put a cup of kibble in a large Kong toy, plug up the small hole with cheese or a smushed Pill Pocket, then pour water or broth over the kibble, stand it up (small end down) in a plastic cup to keep it from spilling, and put the Kong in the freezer overnight. The next day everyone's breakfast is frozen in a block of ice inside the Kong. It can take up to two hours for my pups to finish their kibble pops. That's two hours of mental stimulation for them and two hours of uninterrupted work time for me!
- **Play tug!** Forget about the old-fashioned notion that tug will make your dog aggressive or teach him to be "dominant" – it's just not true. Tug can be a great game for you and your dog – with a few rules. I recommend using one designated toy that you control (you bring it out when you want to play and put it away when you say the game is over). Rover should be trained to drop the tug-toy when you ask. And lastly, I recommend abruptly (but calmly) ending the game if Rover's teeth touch your skin. He should learn that if he "gets" you (even by accident), all the fun stops. With those rules in mind, tug away. You can even let your dog win sometimes.
- **Teach your dog to "find it."** Start by "hiding" a piece of food in plain sight (distract him so that he doesn't actually see you put it down) then tell him to "find it!" Stand near the treat and let him try to figure out what you want. If he needs a little help understanding the game, you can tap your foot or point to the treat the first few times. Cheer and praise him when he finds it. Once he understands the cue "Find it," (this usually takes a couple of sessions, depending on the dog) you can start making the hiding places a little harder to gradually increase the difficulty of the game.
- **Train Rover to do new things.** Teaching basic manners, employing attention exercises like "touch-targeting" and "watch-me," and having Rover learn a few tricks will stimulate him mentally and help exhaust some of his energy. Pick one new thing to work on each week and then spend 10 minutes a day (broken into lots of 2- or 3-minute micro-sessions) teaching him the behavior of the week.

These simple methods will keep Rover interested and engaged in his world. An engaged dog is a happy (and well-behaved) dog!