

# Busy is Healthy: Enrichment for Your NMDR Dog



**Enrichment** is keeping your dog's body and brain busy. It's critical for pet dogs and all other domestic animals to get proper enrichment. The benefits include:

- Working off energy: The old saying that "a tired dog is a well-behaved dog" is true.
- Emotional wellbeing: enrichment activities can reduce stress, and help a dog feel more confident and happier.
- Relationship building: when you engage in enrichment activities with your dog, you build trust and happy associations.
- Social engagement: dogs are social creatures, and enrichment activities can give dogs opportunities to interact with humans and other dogs as well.

## How to do it

- Body and brain: physical exercise is important and valuable, but a dog also uses a lot of energy when she uses her brain.
- Stimulate the senses: enrichment activities engage any combination of the five senses. Scent is the most powerful of a dog's senses, and offers a lot of opportunities. A dog's brain has to work hard to process the scents in the world around her, and that uses a lot of energy. Engaging the other senses is important as well: sight, sound, taste and touch.
- Encourage instinctive behavior: think of things dogs naturally like to do, and find ways to let her do them. Examples of a dog's instinctive behaviors include foraging, chasing, tugging, chewing, and digging.
- Active and passive: many enrichment activities offer opportunities for you to spend time with and bond with your dog, but there are also enrichment activities that a dog can do on her own, which can be very valuable if you need to keep her busy while you're doing something else.

## Examples of great enrichment activities

**Exercise:** simply going for a leash walk offers a dog an opportunity to burn calories physically but also use brain power to process scent; sometimes as much as physical activity. This is why it's important to give your dog lots of time to check out all the different smells along your walking route. Games like fetch and tug of war also give a dog opportunities to exercise, and to practice instinctive behaviors as well. And for dogs who love other dogs (very common in survivors of commercial breeding facilities), play dates and play groups with friends' dogs are wonderful enrichment.

**Use food:** there are boundless opportunities to use food in enrichment activities. This obviously includes treats. But for dogs who are good eaters, also consider using the meals that they would normally get "For Free" in a bowl. Feeding your dog from brain toys and food puzzles instead of out

of a bowl can be a great way to keep your dog busy, and an added benefit is that this is something that the dog can do without you there. Stuffing a brain toy like a Kong gives your dog an opportunity to chew and use her brain to get the food out. There are lots of other types of brain toys and food puzzles available at retail outlets. There are also lots of ways that you can make some great DIY food puzzles for your dog. See the link at the end of this article. You don't even need any equipment to use food to keep your dog busy: simply feeding your dog by scattering her food on the floor or in the grass gives your dog something to do for a few minutes.

**Hand feeding:** for shy dogs, simply feeding them their meals when a little handful at a time from your hand can be a valuable bonding activity. Mixing some canned food or other tasty healthy stuff to make it more appealing if your dog is hesitant.

**Nose work:** hide food and treats and let your dog find them by scent. See our training plan for nose work for how to get started.

## Toys

It's important to give your dog plenty of objects that they can play with and chew on. If they have toys, it will also make it easier for you to refocus them when they want to play with or chew on shoes, furniture etc. Try different kinds of toys to see what your dog likes best. Squeaky or crinkly toys can stimulate a dog's sense of touch and sound, and chew toys can give them a healthy outlet for chewing.

## Training

Working with your dog to teach her new things is a great way to exercise her body and brain, and for you to bond with her, as well. You can teach "obedience" behaviors yourself, or consider signing up for a class or private sessions with a certified, evidence-based behavior expert. You can also consider trying things like agility training. Simply teaching your dog to feel more confident in different places can be a great brain-stimulating activity for her. Go to the park, sit with her and watch the world go by (while giving her lots of treats).

## Environmental

Add things to your dog's environment to keep her senses busy. Use aromatherapy to stimulate her sense of smell; calming scents like chamomile, lavender etc. can also help to reduce her stress.. Play music or the TV for her senses of hearing and vision. YouTube has many videos lasting many hours that are made to give dogs things to watch and listen to.

## Be creative

You'll come to know your dog better than anyone. Think of new ideas to keep her brain and body busy in ways that may be unique to her. Remember that every dog is different, so what works great for one dog may not work for another, so keep trying. And remember also that a problem behavior from your dog might be an inspiration for the right enrichment activity. Does your dog dig a lot? Give her a sandbox area where digging is "legal" and hide toys and food items in it for her to dig up. Does your dog like to chase squirrels? Consider a flirt pole (search for it online - it's really fun). Does your dog like to chew? Give her frozen Kongs or chew toys.

## Resources:

Ideas for stuffing Kongs: <https://www.kongcompany.com/library/how-to-stuff-a-kong/>

Aromatherapy: <https://www.blackwingfarms.com/>

Ideas for DIY enrichment items: <https://www.aspca.org/pet-care/dog-care/canine-diy-enrichment>