



## Importance of Food Enrichment

### **Food Enrichment**

Food enrichment is the process of making the eating experience fun and interesting for the dog. Often, dog owners focus on meeting the dog's physical needs through meal time, but it is equally important to meet the dog's mental needs. Food enrichment taps into the dog's instinctual behaviors while also providing a necessary and fulfilling mental outlet for energy.

Food enrichment is often referred to as "no bowl feeding". Food bowls are quite boring for dogs and provide no mental or physical stimulation. Possible results of limited mental outlets during meals are dogs that behave in one of two ways when presented with food. One, the dog is unmotivated by food and may eat slowly, graze throughout the day, or even turn up their nose when presented with their meal. These dogs have no value attached to their food and basically only eat to survive. Two, they likely inhale their food without even bothering to chew, in a vacuum like fashion, and finish their meal before you even step away. This can be physically dangerous for the dog and can cause choking or bloat. Some dogs are in the middle of this spectrum, but even they will benefit from adding food enrichment to their daily routine. Options for "no bowl feeding" include:

- Training exercises where the dog works for their meal
- Games where the dog hunts or scavenges for their meal
- Puzzle toys where the dog interacts with toys for their meal

### **Dogs Need Jobs**

A major difference between dogs and wolves is how they acquire their meals. Wolves are hunters; they typically will work as a pack to take down their prey and they have a refined hunting sequence to kill and consume the animals they hunt. Dogs, instinctually, are meant to scavenge and forage for their food. Their process for acquiring food is done individually, rather than as a pack, and they have to spend most of their day using problem solving skills to navigate human environments. Most feral dogs are still dependent in some way on humans, whether that's by rifling through the trash, hanging around close enough to pick up scraps, or stealing from local farms and ranches.

Additionally, over the last 4,000 years, humans have been honing that desire to work hard for food, through careful breeding programs, for specific jobs, like hunting and herding, for example. Then, this instinctual, genetically refined creature, is brought home to lay around in the house most of the day. As you can



imagine, most dogs have a hard time with this lifestyle change and often find ways to drain the energy reserved for those breed specific tasks (chewing the furniture, herding the children, barking at strangers walking by, etc.). Food enrichment is one of the easiest, most efficient ways to help our dogs feel satisfied in our urban and suburban environments. Food bowls are boring! Eliminating the food bowl is the first step towards an enriched dog.

### **Why use food**

In training programs, we often use food to reinforce the dog. This is done for a variety of reasons. One, food is required; all living creatures need to eat to survive. By providing something to the dog that is necessary to their survival, you will motivate the dog on an instinctual level. Two, food is reinforcing; think of how you feel when presented with your favorite meal, eating is fun! During mealtime, dopamine floods the brain, creating a pleasure response, and helps the eater feel reinforced. Three, our bodies physiologically change while we are eating; think of Pavlov's dogs, the dogs began to salivate when they *predicted* food, not just when food was physically present. This physiological response can then be tied to various stimuli, like a clicker or standing on a grooming table. Most restaurants are very positive places for humans because of the association we have created between the environment and the delicious meal. Four, food is easy to use; one good behavior = one piece of food, there is no ambiguity, it just makes sense. Most humans operate on a similar payment structure: one hour of work = one set dollar amount. Working for a set form of currency is understood cross species.

### **Food Motivation**

All animals are food motivated, provided they are physically healthy. Food motivation is incredibly important for dogs that interact with humans on a daily basis, especially if we want to be able to influence their behavior through training. The lack of food motivation we see in many dogs is often a learned behavior, which means that increased food motivation can also be learned with the right approach. The main reasons that dogs are not food motivated are listed below. If we address all of these, then even the super picky eaters will begin looking for ways to earn those food rewards.

- **Palatability:** Every dog has a unique pallet, like humans, and may like or dislike certain flavors. Unlike humans, dogs' sense of taste is nowhere near as powerful as their sense of smell, so typically the more stinky the food, the better. Finding the right flavors for the particular dog you're working with will make all the difference. When experimenting with different flavors, start with grain-free options, then test different protein types (venison, fish, etc.), then trial human food



options (cheese, carrots, bananas, etc.) until you find the irresistible items for that dog. I also recommend rotating food choices to keep things interesting for the dog. Many dogs get bored if they are always eating the same thing. Variety is key to maintaining interest!

- **Nutrition:** Proper nutrition is crucial to maintaining a healthy, happy dog. If the dog is not receiving quality food that meets their physical needs, they may have physical or behavioral issues that need to be addressed through diet change before training or anything else will be effective. Because every dog has a specific set of needs, there is no “one diet fits all” option. Do your due diligence when determining the best diet for the dog.

Typically, a grain-free, natural, novel protein diet will be the best starting point for most dogs. The less processing involved in the dog’s diet, the better, and always avoid corn based diets, if possible. Feeding or supplementing with raw or minimally processed ingredients will benefit most dogs and provide many of the nutrients not naturally found in baked or processed foods. Adding supplements like probiotics, anti-oxidants, and Omega 3 fatty acids can also increase gut health in the dog. The happier the dog’s digestive tract, the happier and more successful the dog!

- **Availability:** Dogs might as well have taken an Econ class with their fluent understanding of the supply and demand concepts. If the food is offered with an unlimited supply, then the dog will have a very low demand. If the supply is limited, the demand naturally will increase. Feeding dogs in meals rather than free feeding is better from a motivation standpoint, as well as a physical standpoint. Setting up a mealtime teaches the dog that the food is only available for a limited amount of time and if they walk away, it will disappear. **Never** take food away from a dog, but if the dog is no longer engaged with the food, then remove the remaining food so it is no longer available. Simply feed a normal meal’s worth at the next mealtime (rather than add the remaining amount to a normal meal) and soon the dog will realize that when the food is available, it is time to eat. If the food is not palatable to the dog, they may not eat it, so refer back to the previous section. Also, if the dog is not eating due to physical or health



reasons, you will notice much sooner if the dog is on meals rather than on a free feeding schedule.

Additionally, if the dog is receiving too much food, the food motivation will decrease. Make sure the dog is a healthy weight and receiving the appropriate amount daily. If the dog is not hungry, they are unlikely to be food motivated. Pay close attention to the weight of the dog. If the dog's weight fluctuates up or down with food or routine changes, be sure to address the appropriate amount of daily calories with the veterinarian. For most dogs, an ideal weight is represented when you can barely see the last rib in the rib cage but cannot see the other ribs, and you can easily feel but not easily see the hip bones on the dog. The dog's belly should tuck up at the waist, not hang down even with the deepest part of the dog's chest. Know that breeds are shaped very differently and dogs of different ages may have different ideal weights. Discuss the dog's physical condition with the vet to determine if weight loss or weight gain may be needed.

- **Value:** What is each piece of kibble worth to the dog? A penny? A dollar? 5 dollars? The value of the kibble is determined by what the dog was required to do to earn it. Think about food for dogs like money for humans. If a human has to work hard for every dollar they earn, they will have a very different value of a dollar than someone who has unlimited access to funds. By encouraging the dog to work for their food, you will automatically increase the value of the food. By having the dog lay down for one treat and come when called for one treat, then sit for an entire bowl of kibble, the value of the kibble becomes significantly less than the treats previously used. Interestingly, studies show that dogs actually find performing learned tasks for food *more* rewarding than receiving the food freely. Use food enrichment exercises to give the dog a job and a way to earn their food rewards.
- **Stress:** Many dogs cannot eat if they are anxious or stressed. If your, normally food motivated, dog refuses a treat, they may be under enough stress to discourage them from eating. Cortisol levels increase in the brain during a stressful event. This increase in cortisol has negative effects on learning and memory retention, thus making training exceptionally difficult. Immediately analyze the context of the situation to determine if there is a stressor (or many stressors) present that may be triggering such an extreme emotional response. It



is important to help the dog feel more comfortable in these situations or to remove the dog from the stressful environment. The dog will be able to accept food again once they are in a more relaxed state of mind. Always pay attention to signs of stress when working with the dog to avoid traumatizing the dog or causing the dog to act out defensively. Additionally, if the dog is in a chronic stress state, the lasting effects of continued high cortisol levels in the brain can cause many other health issues long term. The ability to take food becomes a good barometer for stress when working with a dog.

### **Natural outlets to replace naughty behaviors**

Shredding, chewing, licking, digging, and chasing are all natural outlets for dogs and can be channeled through food enrichment activities. Normally, in our human environments, these behaviors are deemed inappropriate and we discourage the dogs from doing them. Unfortunately, stopping unwanted behavior without providing an appropriate replacement behavior can (and often will) cause frustration, stress, boredom, and anxiety. Listed below are a few examples of how to satisfy the dog's natural outlets, while giving them permission and structure. Your creativity is the limit for food enrichment. Make sure to set the dog up for success by starting with easy enrichment items and gradually make the game more and more challenging as they develop the necessary skills and understand the objective. Every dog is different, be sure to pick enrichment ideas that are safe and appropriate for your dog.

- **Shredding:** Take a handful of kibble, place it into a crumpled up piece of paper torn off of a paper grocery bag (repeat until you have stuffed the dog's entire meal into paper crumples), stuff crumpled paper balls into a cardboard box (ex. cereal box), then give it to the dog and watch them shred it to oblivion! Allow the dog to get all the goodies, then, pick up the pieces after to avoid consumption of the puzzle.
- **Chewing:** Raw bones are an excellent supplement to the dog's diet. If used as a chewing item, select a bone that is large enough to take some time to consume like a beef femur section. The dog will be able to get all the marrow and raw scraps off the bone but may not be able to consume the bone itself. If the dog is not able to finish the raw bone in one sitting, place the bone in the freezer until the next chew session, so it stays fresh. Once the raw material has been consumed and the bone has been "cleaned" by the dog, use the bone to stuff food items into. Refer to the licking category for ideas for food stuffed toys.



- **Licking:** Mix kibble and a little wet food, plain yogurt, canned pumpkin, peanut butter, or whatever else will add a little moisture and work as the glue for the kibble. Stuff the mixture into multiple Kong toys (or bones, or other puzzle toys) and place them in the freezer. Have pre-stuffed Kongs on hand so you can pull one out and hand it to the dog any time you would like them to go settle for a period of time.
- **Digging:** Bury multiple stuffed Kongs/ bones / treats / etc. in a sand box or appropriate digging location so the dog can unearth buried treasure!
- **Chasing:** Put the dog's kibble and a couple extra goodies (treats, cheese bits) into a plastic juice bottle. Remove the plastic cap, and the little plastic cap ring from the bottle, then place the bottle on the ground and watch the pup kick, carry, and chase it all over while working for the kibble inside.
- **Sniffing:** 1) Scatter kibble around on the carpet or in the lawn and release the dog to "find it". 2) Create a kibble trail that goes through the house or yard for the dog to track. 3) Set up piles of kibble in, easy to access but not easy to see, hiding places around the house for the dog to hunt for.
- **Working:** Figure out what the dog was bred to do and use it! Example: retrievers – teach fetch and reinforce retrievals with a handful of kibble.
- **Good Replacement Behaviors:** Use obedience exercises like sit, down, come, loose leash walking, etc. to teach the dog good replacement behaviors for some of their not so good behaviors. Use kibble stored in a treat pouch or in strategic locations around the house to reinforce good choices.

### **Stress Relief / Effects on the Brain**

Shredding, chewing, licking, digging, chasing, and working are all fabulous energy burners for dogs. Did you know that doing a sniffing exercise drains 5 times more energy than an average walk down the sidewalk?! Additionally, these activities help reduce stress, alleviate pent up frustration, and work to self soothe overstimulated dogs. Licking releases pleasurable endorphins in the dog's brain causing the dog to relax and feel more comfortable. Using a food stuffed Kong or a bowl smeared with peanut butter will help a worried or overstimulated dog reduce their arousal to a more manageable level. This food enrichment tool can also create a more positive pairing with the environment. Giving a dog a food stuffed Kong every time they are crated will help turn the crate into a calm and pleasurable place.



Congratulations on helping your pup become Pawsitively Trained!

These materials are provided for you as a way to review behaviors previously discussed in training sessions. It is important for the success of both you and your dog that these materials are used for reviewing, not for teaching. Do not skip ahead, even if you think your dog is ready. Every dog, every owner, and every situation is specific and requires a training program catered to fit; because these handouts are very general, please talk to Kelsey before attempting any of these training techniques on your own.

Please contact us with any questions, comments, or concerns!!

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