



Training Playbook: Canine Care and Enrichment

Introduction

For most dogs, the shelter can be a stressful and chaotic environment. Whether they are there for a short or a long stay, the shelter can cause stress from sensory overload. Dogs may exhibit that stress in a variety of ways. They can become frustrated and shut down, showing little to no engagement with the environment. They can become reactive to humans or other animals, and bark or lunge at them from their kennel.

That's why it's critical to provide proper care and enrichment for dogs when they are in shelters. Providing enrichment for dogs improves their quality of life and can help mitigate undesirable behaviors that might manifest in a shelter environment. They become happier, healthier, safer to work with and are more adoptable overall. This playbook illustrates the need for a comprehensive dog care and enrichment program within shelter operations and includes tips on how to get started.

Why enrichment?

Enrichment is a big part of providing proper physical and mental stimulation for dogs in shelters. By engaging your dog population, you are reducing stress and sustaining realistic behaviors that are more indicative of how the dog will behave outside of the shelter environment.

Shelter staff and volunteers are often overwhelmed and short on time, but providing enrichment doesn't have to be expensive or time-consuming. Many forms of enrichment, in fact, are free and easy to incorporate into the daily routine. Every interaction we have with an animal is an opportunity to help him or her. Comprehensive care and enrichment ultimately make our jobs easier, reduce length of stay and increase lifesaving.

A successful enrichment program should involve all the dogs in your population and each dog should have an individual enrichment plan, depending on what the dog finds enjoyable. One dog may prefer an increase in stimulation, while another may prefer a decrease. Naturally, dogs want to sniff, chase, chew, run and dig. Shelters by design remove the ability for dogs to perform some of these natural behaviors, which can cause frustration. So, enrichment involves finding appropriate ways for dogs to engage in these activities.

The daily routine

Dogs benefit from knowing what to expect in their day-to-day interactions. Make the dogs' daily routine as consistent as possible so they know what to expect and when to expect it. For example, kennel cleaning should happen at the same time each day so the dog can prepare accordingly. And cleaning should be paired with treats from staff and volunteers to make the cleaning experience enriching and less frightening.

In addition, consider including quiet time in the daily routine so dogs have a break from the loud shelter environment. An enrichment program enhances the mental health of the dogs in our care and can be readily incorporated into all aspects of the shelter's daily routine.

Tracking

To allow staff and volunteers to know who received what form of enrichment on any given day and who still needs enrichment, you'll want to develop a tracking system. Consistent documentation ensures that each dog is getting a continued variety of enrichment and helps to identify their individual preferences.

One way to track enrichment is to attach reversible cards to kennel gates and record on the cards the enrichment received or enrichment needed. Another option is to track enrichment using a whiteboard or calendar. Either way, consider tracking not only enrichment, but relevant day-to-day interactions and changes in dogs' behavior.

Stimulating the senses

Part of enrichment is stimulating dogs' senses, and there are a variety of ways to accomplish this.

Smell: Dogs lead with their noses. Allowing dogs the time to sniff when they're outside on a walk is almost more important than the walk itself. Sniffing people and other dogs (if the dog is people- and dog-friendly) is also enriching.

Nose work is an activity that dogs can do even when you're not present. Hide treats inside cardboard boxes and put the boxes in the kennel. While one dog is trying to find the treats, you can step away and clean another kennel.

Aromatherapy can be interesting and calming to dogs. Put a drop of lavender oil on your hand and go about your daily routine, or spritz a diluted essential oil from a spray bottle on bandanas attached to kennel gates and see if you notice any changes in the dogs' behavior.

Sound (or lack of): Playing music and audiobooks or reading aloud to dogs can be calming and enriching; these are great activities for shy dogs. Try soothing classical or reggae music and see how the dogs respond.

As mentioned above, quiet time can really make a difference and allow the dogs time to rest. Try to enforce quiet hours during a certain time of day. Better yet, invite a dog to spend an hour or two in a shelter office away from the noise, and then swap out for a different dog.

Touch: Petting and massaging dogs who are comfortable with handling can relieve stress. Those interacting with dogs on this level should be trained in basic [dog body language](#). Not all dogs appreciate petting and handling, of course, so those dogs may require other types of enrichment and time to warm up to handlers. Consider putting kiddie pools in the yard for dogs who like to splash around or a ball pit for those who love balls.

Sight: Visual stimuli can cause stress for dogs. For example, seeing other dogs being walked down the hallway past their kennels can be intimidating. However, it's also important to find a healthy balance. Consider putting up removable visual barriers on the kennels to help dogs relax when there is commotion in the shelter hallway.

Taste: [Food puzzles](#), slow feeders, Kongs and other food enrichment items can be used during regular feeding routines. You can even freeze meals to keep dogs mentally stimulated for a longer period of time. Put kibble mixed with broth in ice cube trays, freeze them and then pass them out to the dogs. Another option is hiding kibble in cardboard boxes or empty egg cartons.

Toys

[Toys](#) are an integral part of enrichment, so pass out blankets and toys to dogs who can safely have them. Some dogs will chew and ingest pieces of blanket or toys, which can lead to a complicated medical situation if it creates an intestinal blockage. If you notice dogs trying to eat pieces of fabric or toys, they should not have access to soft objects. Remember to document that information so other staff and volunteers are aware.

In addition, be mindful of disease control and make sure that toys and blankets are disinfected between uses. Swap out clean toys so the dogs get to sniff and play with something different. Some dogs who have a lot of energy enjoy moving toys like Jolly Balls around in the kennel or a play yard.

Getting out of the shelter

Getting dogs out of the shelter allows us to see any changes in behavior when the dogs are outside, which gives us more information to give to potential adopters. If possible, take dogs for car rides, and consider implementing a field trip or sleepover program. Be sure to establish parameters for what dogs are appropriate for the program. While the dogs are on their car rides, field trips or sleepovers, gather information about their behavior. Volunteers can be a huge help in implementing and running this type of program.

Play dates

Play dates and play groups are a great form of enrichment for dogs who enjoy the company of other dogs. If you're planning to implement play groups at your shelter, be sure to select and match appropriate dogs according to play style. Staff or volunteers conducting the play groups should have all the necessary tools and training for conducting play groups safely. Volunteers can participate in running a play-group program and can help ensure an appropriate ratio of humans to dogs in the play yard.

For dogs who don't like interacting with other dogs, this isn't a suitable outlet. However, that doesn't mean they can't enjoy walking down the street near another dog while on leash. Try doing parallel walks without any physical interaction.

Besides being enriching for the dogs, all of these activities give us more information about the dogs and can increase adoptability. Be sure to document each interaction so the information can be shared with potential adopters, staff and volunteers.

Training

Basic training is another form of enrichment that can increase adoptability and build confidence. There are hundreds of fun games you can play with dogs, or you can make up your own. Use positive reinforcement techniques to encourage dogs to use their brains and learn new things. Basic training can even be done right in a dog's kennel. Below are some training tips and tricks.

Clicker training: Incorporating a clicker while working with dogs can speed up the learning process. There are countless games you can play [using a clicker](#), either inside the kennel or at the kennel gates. The way a dog presents at the kennel is often what adopters notice first, so work on rewarding dogs for positive presentation — for example, keeping four paws on the floor, sitting, making eye contact.

“Click for quiet” is a game you can play that can change the entire dynamic of the shelter. The results are astonishing and make for a quieter shelter environment, which is beneficial for all. Here's how to play the game: Provide staff and volunteers with clickers. While they walk down the kennel hallways, they should click and reward dogs with a treat only if they are not barking or reacting.

Some dogs will catch on quickly while others will take longer. Some may be nervous about approaching the front of the kennel, but if they're quiet, click and gently toss a treat toward them. All dogs start at different levels, so you may need to reward one for just a few seconds of quiet while others may be able to stay quiet for longer before requiring a reward. Dogs are social learners, so as others catch on, they will understand the game and want to be quiet for treats, too. Play the game throughout the day for a few minutes at a time and monitor the improvements in the facility.

“Look at that”: Some dogs get frustrated behind barriers or on leash when they see other dogs, people or various things they find to be a trigger. Their reactive behavior doesn’t necessarily mean they are aggressive; they may just be frustrated that they can’t get out to play.

“Look at that” (LAT) is a great game for dogs who struggle with reactivity in the shelter. The idea is to click and reward the dog when he looks at his trigger without reacting. You can practice LAT through a barrier or while out on walks with a reactive dog as other dogs pass by (at a safe and comfortable distance from the reactive dog). Doing LAT successfully helps dogs show better in the shelter environment while providing them with training and enrichment.

Think outside the box: Introduce small or large cardboard boxes to dogs in their kennels or the play yard, and see what they do. Start a game using the box: Reward them for interacting with the box or maybe shape their reaction. You can also put different items (toys, treats, etc.) in the box, offer it to the dog and let her work at it while you complete other tasks.

Food: Dogs enjoy searching and working for their food, and it’s easy to give them ways to do this in their kennels, either for meals or treats. There are many different types of slow feeders and **food puzzles** that you can buy (e.g., Kongs), but many DIY options (ice cubes, cardboard boxes, egg cartons, paper towel rolls) are just as effective. Another option is to smear Frisbees or **LickiMats** with peanut butter and place them on the front of the kennels to keep dogs busy and quiet for awhile.

Flirt pole: A flirt pole is a pole with a rope and toy at the end. **Flirt poles** allow dogs to embrace their chase drive in an appropriate way. Using a flirt pole also gives us the chance to teach them cues like “take it” and “drop it.”

Agility: **Agility training** is a great way to provide dogs with both mental and physical exercise. Agility equipment can be expensive, but with a little creativity, you can build something similar with the resources you have. For example, you could use benches, chairs, rocks and trees for obstacles that dogs can walk around, jump up on or over.

Enrichment and relationship-building for challenging dogs

Many dogs enter the shelter system shut down, fearful or willing to act out antagonistically toward people. Dogs exhibiting these behaviors should still be included in your enrichment program, but you may have to adjust your approach. Here are some examples:

- For a dog who is barrier-reactive and won’t allow you to enter the kennel, practice “click for quiet” through the kennel gate.

- A fearful dog may retreat in the kennel as you enter. Take a step back and go slow, allowing the dog to warm up to you. Offer treats by gently tossing them from a distance or leave toys in the run and walk away. Come back later to see if the dog moved the toys when you were gone.
- If a fearful dog is dog-friendly, bring a calm and dog-friendly dog by the kennel and see if you get a positive reaction.

The idea is to work toward creating a relationship between you and the dog so he will start warming up to you and be able to generalize to other people. It might also be beneficial to have each staff person pick a “project dog” to focus on in order to fast-track positive outcomes.

Summary

Enrichment should be fun for both the dogs and the humans. Providing enrichment creates positive relationships, decreases length of stay and enhances the likelihood of positive outcomes.

Don't be afraid to start small and slowly grow your program; each shelter is different. When you're creating a dog enrichment program, we recommend that you do the following:

- Make sure staff and volunteers are committed to dog enrichment.
- Designate a cabinet, closet or other spot for storing dog enrichment supplies (e.g., toys, flirt poles, food puzzles, essential oils).
- Create an Amazon wish list for enrichment supplies.
- Provide staff and volunteers with consistent training on dog enrichment.
- Develop an enrichment tracking system.

If you need further assistance or clarification, please reach out to your [regional strategist](#), [regional director or the Best Friends](#) national shelter support team at team2025@bestfriends.org.

Other resources

- [Enrichment for Dogs in Shelters](#)
- [Training for Shelter Dogs](#)
- [Shelter and Rescue Work: How-To Guides](#)