

Enrichment Protocol for Shelter Dogs

Enrichment refers to mental and physical stimulation. Allowing animals to think, learn and explore goes a long way to keeping them behaviorally healthy in the shelter.

Each shelter dog should be provided with enrichment each day. This should not be considered “extra” – it is part of the humane treatment of confined companion animals.

Consider all of the dog’s senses when providing enrichment.

Olfactory Stimulation

Dogs have an amazing sense of smell and this sense should be stimulated daily.

- Introduce novel scents into the environment (aerosol spray, peel an orange, lavender, etc.)
- Allow dogs to sniff when on walks
- Hide treats for the dogs to find (“find it” (Nosework) and “tracking” games)

Auditory Stimulation

Research shows that some forms of music can be soothing to animals. Classical music, new age music and music designed for stress reduction (Through A Dog’s Ear) should be played at a low volume in the kennels during daytime hours. The music should be turned off at night as all animals required quiet time to sleep.

Visual Stimulation

This sense is stimulated a lot in the shelter environment – in fact sometimes too much. Dogs who become over stimulated or agitated by the sight of other dogs should be moved to a less stimulating cage or a sheet should be hung on their cage door.

Other visually stimulating things can be placed outside the dog runs such as perpetual motion toys or mobiles to provide them with something interesting to look at.

Tactile Stimulation

Many animals respond positively to tactile stimulation from humans. This stimulation involves petting, brushing, and massage. Along with the tactile stimulation comes social interaction and this practice helps to ensure that these social animals receive the attention they need. Make sure to identify the kind of touch the animal appreciates. For example: some dogs like their belly scratched while others find it intimidating.

Taste Stimulation

Dogs should be given special food treats daily to stimulate their taste buds.

Mental Stimulation

All animals need mental stimulation to stay behaviorally healthy in the shelter. Mental stimulation occurs during all of the above practices but additional stimulation should be provided. Below are some additional ideas:

1. Food Gathering enrichment

Presenting food/treats inside a Kong, feeder ball or empty container so that the dog must work to get them out.

2. Clicker training

Clicker training encourages the animal to think.

Physical Stimulation

All dogs require exercise to remain healthy. Dogs should be walked on a leash as well as provided aerobic exercise in the form of:

1. Running/jogging with a human
2. Playing a game of fetch
3. Playing a game of tug (with rules)
4. Agility

Play Stimulation

Play is the best way to keep dogs in a positive state of mind. Each shelter dog should be provided with a play session at least several times a week and whenever he/she looks depressed.

Toys should be provided to the dogs in their cages to stimulate self-play.

Social Stimulation

Dogs are social animals and as such should be provided with opportunities for social interaction with humans and conspecifics (if appropriate).

Those individuals who appear to be dog-friendly should be allowed time with another dog for socialization and play. First test the dogs together on leash and if all goes well – remove the leashes and supervise the session. If the dogs appear to enjoy each other's company and play well they should be placed together for a short time each day.