



# Enrichment & Education

## Boarding trends focus on individual programs to enhance dogs' participation

By Rachel Brix, BSEd, CPDT-KA

So many of America's dogs spend their days waiting for their humans to come home; usually perched on a couch or dog bed for several hours, sleeping the day away or maybe staring out the window. We might leave the TV on and give them a Kong® to pass some of the time. When we get home, we're tired from a long day and still have the evenings' tasks ahead of us, so maybe we take her for a brisk walk along the usual route and then feed her kibble in the same stainless-steel bowl. Then, as we're watching TV or on our phones, we might give a few pats on the head. Some dogs get more than this, and some unfortunately less, but at the end of the day many of our dogs are bored. And because they're bored, they often present with behavior problems at best, lacking quality of life at worst. All our dogs can benefit from more enrichment in their lives. And a deeper connection with us.

Pioneered by Dr. Hal Markowitz in the 1960s, enrichment originated by focusing on zoo animals. He called zoos "concrete wastelands" and was determined to improve the animals' lives in captivity. He first developed ethograms, or inventories of behaviors, for each species; then, after determining the animals' needs, came the task of how to meet those needs in captivity.

Our pet dogs, although not captive wild animals, still have instinctual and natural behaviors. Domestication has softened many of these behaviors, but as we continue to look to improve our dogs' lives and our relationships with them, we must consider their species-specific needs and create enrichment programs and protocols to meet those needs. One essential for dogs is sensory stimulation, especially sense of smell. Additional needs include food-related behaviors such as scavenging and foraging; dogs love to work for their food! Emotional needs include security and safety and relationship and social needs. Agency and environment are vital for a dog's

sense of security, independence and confidence. And dogs love to problem solve. Simply put, enrichment is about engagement: actively engaging our dogs in ways that encourage their willing participation and fulfill as many of their needs as possible.

At Percy's Playground, a boarding and training facility, the focus is on each individual dog. The enrichment plan starts with a dog's completed profile and morphs and molds as relationships are built with both canine and human clients. By doing so, we're able to successfully board dogs like Nova, who have specific behavioral needs, or Maggie or Boomer, who lack confidence for exploring outdoors; or dogs who don't thrive in a playgroup-only environment.

Our own late great husky mix, Percy, gave us our first lessons in enrichment many years ago. So we designed our boarding and training facility to fulfill two main goals: enrichment and education. We focus on connecting the enrichment we do with the dogs in our care with how pet parents can continue and enhance the program at home, thereby improving relationships and the dogs' quality of life. The first main priority at our facility is being force free and fear free. To that end, our approach prioritizes making sure our guest dogs are as safe and secure as possible, distinguishing between the two as being free from harm and feeling free from harm, respectively. This involves establishing trust and rapport as quickly as possible. To borrow the words of Fear Free Pets®, "Every interaction has the power to influence the handleability and emotional state of the animal in subsequent interactions and visits." At Percy's we know each and every time we engage with a guest dog, we have the opportunity to build up the trust bank account — crucial for success at our dog-human-centered facility.

Relationship-building with both our four-legged and two-legged clients is a major component of our enrichment protocol. As a first step in the process of creating individual enrichment programs for each guest dog, we have a comprehensive profile form completed by each pet parent; then we require a meet and greet. Our dog-centered introductory meetings provide the opportunity for each dog to become familiar with us and our facility in a fun way. We also establish rapport with their humans by reviewing their dog's profile with them, giving them a tour, and encouraging questions and dialogue. By enveloping the pet parents in the process, we are setting up the dog and the pet parent for at-home enrichment success.

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If at the meet and greet we observe a dog to be nervous or hesitant, we might recommend an abbreviated day stay (a few hours), as with Nova, who is wary of strangers, and work up to longer stays. For more moderate to severe cases, we may recommend a certified behavior consultant or even a behaviorist and partner on a behavior modification plan. In such cases, we may recommend a dog stay with a friend, family member or even a pet sitter. While sometimes it affects our bottom line, we would much rather see a dog happy and secure at home in a familiar environment than stressed in ours until behavior modification and training can take place. Our goal is to minimize stress, fear, and anxiety, and when we meet pet dogs who aren't good candidates for boarding, most pet parents are grateful for the help and suggestions as the dog's issues are typically not new. As such we've developed a niche for first-time boarders, from puppies to seniors, whose humans haven't previously felt comfortable enough to leave them anywhere before. Our human clients overwhelmingly say the human interaction is their most favorite part about our facility: knowing their dogs will get lots of human interaction.

Once in our care, we work to quickly establish our routine with each dog. We allow for individual differences to focus on environmental and calming enrichment. For example, how they enter and exit their space, how we enter and exit their space, what type of bedding they receive or what kind of water bowl they need. As an example, pit-mix Star, was only drinking out of either a hose or the bathtub at home and had never boarded before; because we spend so much one-on-one time with our guest dogs, we were able to help her choose a bowl she found acceptable and spend time training her to use it. And as

part of our calming enrichment, we utilize dog-friendly essential oils and provide a variety of music from streaming classical to my husband playing acoustic guitar lullabies at night.

Another one of our priorities is giving each guest dog as much agency as we can. This means empowering dogs with choices, so they have some control over their preferred outcomes. One of the main ways we provide agency is by allowing each guest dog to decide what they will do in any given outing. A lot of times that's providing choices for what type/s of toys they will play with. Other times that might be agility or the German-born activity of degility, which combines agility, parkour and fitness and focuses on dogs who are impaired, senior, not as active as they once were or even dogs who can benefit from confidence building. A lot of

times that might be scent work activities, digging or foraging, or fun with a flirt pole (basically an over-sized cat toy), which provides an outlet for instinctual behaviors such as stalking, chasing and herding (mental and physical exercise). It also allows for some additional mental exercise by way of training (drop it, get it) and tossing a treat for dogs to find for dropping it adds a smidge of scent work, too. Some of our guest dogs thrive on playing fetch or tug (by the rules) and, as training is often the best form of mental exercise, we've taught many dogs how to catch flying discs among other games, tricks, and cues. For 2021, we're adding more habitat enrichment, treibball (best described as urban herding and is much like soccer) and foundational aspects of canine fitness. Most (all?) of these are activities their humans can continue with their dogs at home.

To best focus on as many aspects of individualized enrichment as possible, we completely forgo playgroups. Instead, each dog gets multiple one-on-one outings each day with a human, taking part in all kinds of activities from scent work to agility to foraging to fetch to task training to even sitting and getting lots of pets and tummy rubs, and many things in between. Each dog gets to choose how they spend their time in one of our completely fenced outdoor play yards or in our indoor play area. We are a cage-free facility, and our guest dogs enjoy spaces that are 85 square feet and 160 square feet, which includes 100 square feet personal patio space. This allows for choices of how they use their space and provides a comfortable respite for much-needed downtime and naps throughout the day. We can also engage our guest dogs in a variety of activities in their personal space if they so choose, especially on inclement weather days.



Frankie loves to climb and jump.

Admittedly, when we first opened, a lot of people were skeptical we would be successful because we don't incorporate playgroups into our enrichment protocols. Some potential clients even avoid our services entirely under the unfortunate impression that without playgroups their dogs wouldn't get what they need, would be bored, or wouldn't be tired when they got home. For us, even well-structured playgroups just don't provide for the enrichment and type of interaction we want to have with both our canine and human clients.

Furthermore, many adult dogs simply don't want to play with other dogs. Dawn Antoniak-Mitchell, CPDT-KSA, CBCC-KA, acknowledges in her book *Terrier-Centric Training*: "Dog owners often have a hard time accepting that most adult dogs don't need or want to 'play' with other dogs in the same way puppies do... As puppies mature the need for this type of interaction [learning social and survival skills] with other dogs naturally diminishes. [Especially] dogs who have been bred to work alone often lose their desire to play with other dogs far sooner than those dogs who have been bred to work more closely with other dogs." Moreover, even if dogs are dog-social, without proper management and downtime there's typically a lot of stress. And ultimately, many dogs fall into the dog-tolerant, dog-selective, or even dog-aggressive categories and simply do not thrive in playgroups. And if that's the only option a dog has for his whole day stress, anxiety, fear and even flooding can result, especially for extended stays.

Also, in our experience, social interactions seem to be the easiest and most common enrichment pet parents are already providing for their dogs, in addition to physical exercise. Many pet parents already take their dogs to dog parks, on play dates, or other places where people and dogs congregate. But surprisingly, a small number of our two-legged clients actually play with their dogs; not because they don't love them, but more or less because they either literally don't know



Yes, you can teach an old dog new tricks! Spencer is all about the tunnel.



Coco takes a run through the Rainbow Ladder.

how to engage their dogs in play, don't realize how important play and enrichment are for a dog's overall well-being, or simply think their dogs aren't interested in toys and good-for-dogs activities.

As a matter of fact, on a surprising number of our dog profiles, pet parents indicate their dogs don't like toys or don't like playing with toys; however, most oftentimes we find their dogs, regardless of breed or age, really do enjoy engaging in play, often with multiple types of toys or engaging in different types of activities. Therefore, we're able to make solid recommendations to help take the guesswork out of what they should buy or try with their dogs to help facilitate at-home continuance of the enrichment fun. Our approach is very fulfilling, for us and for our clients, and we are heartened by testaments from our clients, like this success story about Brodie, a 12-year-old Gordon Setter. Brodie's dad said, "Our senior dog required special attention



Elio loves it all, sometimes all at the same time!

to get over separation anxiety. Rachel and Ryan were wonderful, and soon our dog was acting like he was a youngster. Ryan got Brodie to play and jump and interact in ways I didn't know he was still capable of doing. I look forward to keeping up his new-found enthusiasm for play now that he is home."

We've also found a significant number of pet parents free-feed and have food available to their dogs at all times. At Percy's, instead of free-feeding, we suggest it's a fitting time to incorporate training, scent work, foraging and scavenging. And it's a great way to stimulate dogs without spending a ton of extra time, which our busy clients don't often have in abundance. So they really appreciate the suggestions of puzzle feeders, snuffle mats and scatter feeding; and with a few extra minutes they can hide kibble in boxes or paper towel holders or even just around the house. Feeding is also a great time to work in short training sessions to have dogs work for their meals.

And with regards to training, due to COVID we now currently only offer private sessions focusing on socialization, manners, and behavior modification. And since oftentimes a dog's expression of natural behavior is perceived as inappropriate or "bad," our approach to boarding affords the perfect opportunity to work together with the humans on a training plan. For example, instead of getting in the trash or on the counter we suggest ways to add appropriate enrichment to fulfill the need to scavenge. Or propose using a sandbox (hands down a favorite at Percy's for our guest dogs) as a solution for digging in the vegetable garden. Incorporating enrichment into behavior modification plans is an effective strategy for many common behavioral issues, even reactivity and aggression.

After a visit or two, we're able to work with pet parents to help them incorporate enrichment specific to their dog's preferences



Jo Jo and Percy Playground's Ryan Brix's favorite activity is a game of tug.

and needs. A lot of our recommendations are cheap (or free) and easily incorporated into busy daily living. Establishing this line of communication not only helps foster great relationships with our human clients, but also facilitates making the most out of each visit with their beloved dogs. We love having clients tell us they recently sewed their own snuffle mat and Fluffy can't get enough of foraging for her supper. Or when they tell us they didn't realize their dog loves to play tug or could (or would like) low impact agility or degility. Or they try to give their dog more agency on walks and even in the house. Many clients have told us their dogs overall seem happier and more full of energy since coming to our facility on a regular basis.

At Percy's we see enrichment as advocating for dogs. Advocating for their well-being in our care and in their lives with their humans. All dogs benefit from enrichment, and the humans benefit by cultivating a deeper connection with their dogs. And that's a beautiful thing.



**Rachel Brix, BSEd, CPDT-KA**, has been training dogs and teaching people for a combined 20 years. Also, a writer and speaker, she has spoken twice at the annual APDT conferences and has also been nominated back-to-back years for a Dog Writers Association of America award. She owns and operates Percy's Playground boarding and training facility in Eagle Rock, Missouri, with her husband, who also helps her train—and spoil—their six rescue animals.