

Inside Your

# Dog's Mind

THE HAPPINESS ISSUE



- \* Honor their sense of smell
- \* Enrich their environment
- \* Return gestures of love
- \* Talk so they get you

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ENGAGED

He can slide the lever  
for a delicious treat  
from his puzzle toy.  
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# ENRICH THEIR HOME, EXPAND THEIR MIND

FROM PUZZLE TOYS TO FOOD GAMES,  
A LITTLE COMPLEXITY CAN MULTIPLY THEIR SATISFACTION  
AND FASCINATION WITH THE WORLD.

» *By Jen Reeder*

**O**ne of the keys to making our dogs happy is offering them enrichment beyond simply taking daily walks. While “enrichment” might sound like a complex concept, it’s easy to do.

Fear Free certified dog trainer Nicole Ellis, CPDT-KA, and co-author of *Working Like a Dog*, explains that canine enrichment encompasses activities, toys and environments that stimulate a dog’s body and mind.

“Canine enrichment often provides challenges and keeps them engaged,” she says. “Mental stimulation is important because dogs get bored, so it can help prevent a lot of the destructive behaviors.”

Ellis, who covers her ideas at [tailswithnicole.com](http://tailswithnicole.com), likes to compare it to kids going back to school. “Even though kids have been out playing all day in the summer, the first day of school is exhausting because they’re using their brain in a different way,” she says. “It’s

very similar to our dogs: that kind of thinking can really tire them out.”

While kids don’t always equate school with fun rewards, dogs do—especially when it involves puzzle toys and food games. In fact, according to research out of Sweden and published in *Animal Cognition*, dogs are more excited to get a food reward after solving a problem than they are by simply getting a reward without doing anything to earn it.

As a result, some dog lovers eschew dog bowls and instead, make mealtime a game. This has the added benefit of helping dogs eat more slowly, which is better for their health than gulping down food.

## WHICH DOGS BENEFIT?

Puzzle toys and food games can benefit all dogs by keeping their brains active and busy, and helping them feel comfortable in new places, according to Ellis. For instance, mental stimulation can take the “edge” off high-energy dogs and



occupy puppies, and keep senior dogs engaged. Ellis says playing with mental enrichment toys is a favorite activity for her 17-year-old dog, Maggie.

“With a lot of these mental enrichment toys, they’re using their nose,” Ellis notes. “It involves scent work. As their eyesight starts to go, and their hearing starts to go, their sense of smell doesn’t. So doing things like this where they can smell and work and really engage their nose and brain can be really important for senior dogs.”

### HOW TO GET STARTED

When introducing your dog to a new puzzle feeder or toy, the key is to keep the experience easy and fun.

“If this is new to your dog, I would not buy them an advanced level puzzle game,” Ellis advises. “That can create frustration, and with frustration they just give up and have no interest in playing with it again.”

While introducing any new toy that dispenses treats as a reward, put the treats inside it while the dog is looking on.

Use high-value treats, or as Ellis quips, “Pretty stinky, pretty delicious, mostly meat. Even if your dog loves carrots and blueberries, for the first time, start with some really exciting training treats to keep them motivated.”

★ Make sure the treats can easily fall out of the toy or be extracted from the toy. We want them to “win.” That’s going to make them want to interact with these toys more.

★ Many people start their dog off with a toy called Kong, into which you can stuff goodies such as wet food, canned pumpkin puree or peanut butter. (Note: Never use sugar-free peanut butter since it often contains xylitol, which is toxic to dogs.) Many people will freeze Kong toys, but do not do that the first time out; instead,

make it easy for your dog to lick out the contents. Over time, you can increase the difficulty level and vary the size and type of treats.

### TYPES OF PUZZLE TOYS

Some dogs love treat-dispensing balls; they push the ball with their nose until a treat rolls out of a hole. Ellis recommends the Snoop toys by Outward Hound.

In a similar vein, interactive toys such as the Kong Wobbler or Puffin by Fable Pets need to be knocked over to earn a piece of kibble or treat. Ellis says her dog Rossi bats at his Puffin every time he walks past it just to see if there’s anything inside.

Creative puzzle feeders like the ones created by Nina Ottosson can be adjusted to offer varying levels of difficulty to keep the games interesting. They often involve a dog needing to slide a lever or knob with their nose or paw to

reveal a treat. (Bonus: They’re easy to clean too.)

### REWARDED WITH TOYS

Ellis notes that dogs who aren’t motivated by food treats may prefer enrichment toys like the iDig Stay by iFetch, which allows them to dig and uncover a hidden toy.

Another option: large plush toys that contain smaller toys, like an outer “popcorn box” that hides



The Kong toy can be stuffed with treats dogs love to extract—and then frozen for more complexity.



little popcorn balls with squeakers for your dog to pull out of a hole—almost like the human version of nested dolls.

### **FUN FOOD GAMES**

Dogs can sniff out kibble hidden in felt snuffle mats, or lick wet food frozen onto a lick mat.

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**“I LOVE  
FOOD GAMES  
IN HOTELS.  
IT GETS DOGS  
EXPLORING  
AND FOCUSING  
VERSUS  
LISTENING  
FOR THINGS  
IN THE  
HALLWAY.”**

*\*Nicole Ellis, trainer*

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One of the easiest food games is scattering kibble in grass so your dog can hunt for it, or hiding a treat inside your home.

Ellis and her dogs love playing hide-and-seek together. She will ask them to “stay,” hide while holding a treat, and then call “come.” When the dog finds her, she praises them and gives them a treat.

She also puts treats, tennis balls and toys into cupcake tins so they can pull them out.

If DIY games are your preference, you can also hide kibble or treats inside of a toilet paper or paper towel roll and crumple the ends. Then watch your dog shred the roll to get to their reward.

“Just make sure your dog is not ingesting it because we don’t want to have them eating the cardboard,” Ellis cautions. “But if they’re having fun tearing it and getting to those treats, that’s completely fine.”

Ultimately, mental stimulation through puzzle toys and food games can become one of our dogs’ favorite forms of enrichment and make them happier at home.

“It really does enhance their quality of life,” Ellis says.

“It’s something they love.” \*

