



ENVIRONMENTAL ENRICHMENT for Agility Dogs

By Amanda Shyne, photos by author except where noted



Most agility handlers are initially attracted to the sport of agility because we love dogs and want to engage in an activity that our dogs enjoy. And, most of us would agree, our dogs love playing agility! But, throughout the course of an agility career, many of us find ourselves owning dogs that are very different from our childhood pets or the pets of our nonagility friends.

Regardless of the breed, most of us select dogs that are energetic and driven, two traits that often clash with being a happy household pet. These dogs are driven by internal stimuli that constantly tell them to remain active and to continuously engage in behavior. Scientists call behaviors driven by internal stimuli *behavioral needs*. These behaviors are termed “needs” because if they are not met the animal’s welfare will suffer. To ensure the welfare of our agility dogs, we must consciously employ methods designed to meet their behavioral needs.

Animal welfare has been both a passion and a career for me since graduate school. While in graduate school I studied the welfare of exotic animals living in captive environments. My research was focused on improving welfare in a variety of species living at the Franklin Park Zoo in Boston, MA. All animals, including domesticated dogs, have evolved to engage in a variety of behaviors that are often unnecessary or even impossible to perform while in captivity. For example, African wild dogs do

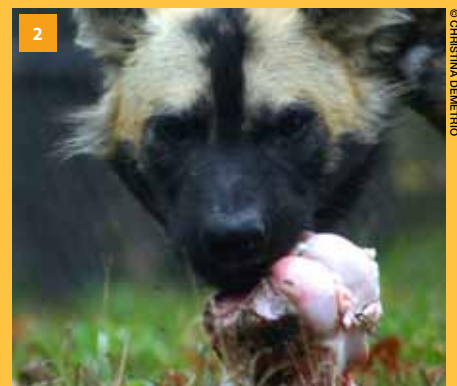
not need to hunt for food in captivity and are usually unable to engage in hunting behaviors. This is problematic because regardless of whether the behavior is necessary for survival, wild dogs seem to feel a desire to engage in this species-typical behavior. Therefore, zoo keepers and researchers are constantly trying to design procedures that encourage species-typical behaviors, or at the very least, to encourage activities related to the animals’ behavioral needs (see **Figure 1**).

One of the ways zoos strive to improve animal welfare is to give the animals various types of environmental enrichment. Environmental enrichment provides captive animals with stimulation designed to decrease boredom and increase species-typical behaviors. Fortunately for zoo animals (and for the public, who dislikes seeing unhappy animals), environmental enrichment is very effective in both reducing indicators of poor welfare, such as pacing, as well as increasing healthy species-typical behaviors. And, fortunately for agility handlers, some of the most effective types of environmental enrichment are easy to use with our agility dogs.

Environmental enrichment often takes advantage of animals’ behavioral need to participate in specific behaviors that lead to predictable and desirable events, such as the acquisition of food (see **Figure 2**). While all animals, including domesticated dogs, have evolved specific



Captive African wild dog enjoying a horse bone.



Captive African wild dog with environmental enrichment designed to encourage species-typical feeding behavior.

behavioral traits, few pets are given an outlet for these natural behaviors. The vast majority of pets spend countless hours alone with no way to express their natural behaviors or pent-up energy. Many common behavioral problems seen in dogs, such as constant digging, destruction of furniture, and incessant barking, often stem from the animal's inability to engage in natural behaviors that produce a desirable consequence.

This information is not new to many agility handlers since their pet's misbehavior may have been what initially attracted them to agility. Agility is a great example of enrichment. It provides our dogs with concrete ways to earn reinforcers and provides them with physical and mental activity. However, most of us are unable to run our dogs every day. Real life obstacles such as snow, work, children, etc. often get in the way of our good faith efforts to train our high-energy friends. It is during these days that other types of environmental enrichment are particularly important.



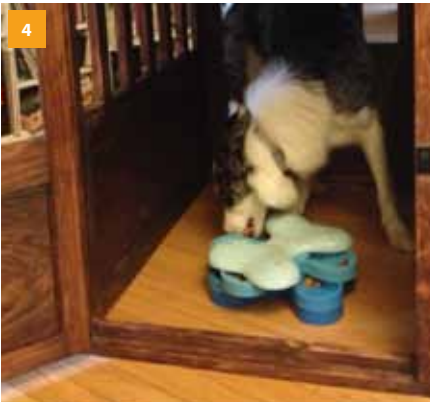
Domesticated dogs foraging for scattered kibble.

One of the easiest ways to enrich your dogs' lives is to "forage" them. Zoo keepers use this term to mean throwing or hiding the animals' daily allotment of food all over the exhibit. One of my favorite experiences in graduate school was watching three African wild dogs enter their exhibit for the first time when their food—raw horse meat—had been scattered and hidden throughout the area. The wild dogs were squeaking and squealing as they ran around like maniacs looking for their food. You did not need to be an animal behavior expert to see that the wild dogs were having a blast!

Since completing my research at the zoo I have changed the way I feed my pets. My dogs are foraged in my back yard each and every morning unless it is raining (see **Figure 3**). I am lucky enough to have a fenced in yard so I simply take their food and scatter it far and wide across my lawn. One of my dogs is a resource-guarder, but this is not problematic because the widely-scattered kibble ensures that there is never enough food to guard. Believe me, if three African wild dogs can forage for pieces of horse meat without fighting, most domesticated dogs can forage for scattered kibble.

FPO
1/4 Ad

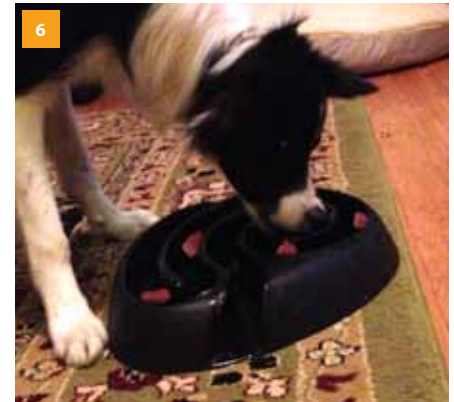
FPO
1/4 Ad



Gimmie with her nightly food puzzle.



My sister's lab Shadow used to knock over his puzzle feeder so my sister bolted it to a wooden platform.



Happy foraging for raw meat in the Buster Dog Maze Bowl.

Some dogs will naturally be more motivated to find food and better foragers than others. My young female, Gimmie, is a dreadful forager and never gets as much food as my other three dogs. Because of this, Gimmie is given a Nina Ottosson food puzzle (the Dog Tornado Game) in her crate each night with some extra food (see **Figure 4**). Food puzzles are another good example of environmental enrichment. Like foraging, food puzzles provide animals with opportunities to engage in an activity that has a tangible, desirable outcome: obtaining food. Some of the different types of food puzzles I use (many of which

are available through Clean Run) include Buster Cubes, any of the Busy Buddy toys (my personal favorites), and the Green Interactive Feeder (see **Figure 5**). Recently a new puzzle feeder came on the market, the Buster Dog Maze Bowl. This is particular good for people who feed their dogs raw meat, since it is easy to fill with raw food and also easy to wash (see **Figure 6**). Raw bones may or may not be considered puzzle feeders but they are definitely enriching. The African wild dogs at the zoo obviously enjoy gnawing on their weekly bones. Not only do the bones increase their feeding time, but they also provide the animals

with an opportunity to engage in species-specific behavior.

All animals, including dogs, need more than just the essentials in order to thrive; they need to engage in meaningful behavior that provides opportunities to fulfill certain needs. By allowing our pets to work for the things they need, we are allowing them to have control over an aspect of their environment. Although our furry friends may seem quite distant from the wild environment in which they evolved, if we take the time and energy to provide them with opportunities to engage in wild-like behavior we will see improvements in their welfare. 🐾

Amanda has been competing in agility for 10 years. She and her Border Collie Dilly were 2008 and 2009 USDAA Dog Agility Steeplechase finalists at the Cynosport World Games. They were also finalists in 2007-2009 in the Grand Prix at Cynosport, placing 3rd in 2008. Amanda is a tenured professor of Psychology at Bridgewater State University in Massachusetts and teaches classes in statistics, learning, dog evolution, and animal behavior. She is a frequent agility seminar presenter and can be contacted at amandashyne@gmail.com.

FPO 1/3 Ad