

Behavior Management – Enrichment and Activity Toys

Why use activity toys?

Dogs are natural scavengers and hunters so the use of food based activity toys is natural and stimulating. Activity toys have a variety of uses in behavior modification programs. Activity toys are useful to redirect an energetic puppy, provide stimulating challenges for a senior pet or provide a more desirable behavior for a dog with separation anxiety when left alone or simply help meet the daily need for activity, exploration oral stimulation or simply food intake. Activity toys filled with food may not be appropriate for dogs that exhibit food or possession guarding behavior.



Cats are natural hunters, so their toys will be most interesting if they are the size and texture of prey, if they can be moved around in such a way as to represent small prey (mice, insects, lizards, birds), or if they contain tasty food or treats.

Which products are recommended?

Toys used in environmental enrichment can vary from something that is basic, inexpensive, and homemade to activity toys that are purchased. The activity toys traditionally used are the Kong or the Squirrel Dude designed by Premier Pet Products (www.premier.com). Premier pet products also has a line of activity toys called "Busy Buddy" toys for dogs and cats many of which can be filled with food. These toys have hollow cavities that allow for stuffing. These products are basic and can be used at various difficulty levels, depending on the pet and contents used for stuffing. The Kong and Squirrel Dude are considered a medium degree of difficulty. Many of the toys are designed to be filled with dry food or small treats which will fall out as they are pushed by the nose, lifted and dropped, or pawed and batted (see handouts "Behavior Management Products for Cats"; "Behavior Management Products for Dogs"; and "Cat Behavior and Training – Play and Play Toys"). A hollow natural bone or hollow natural basted bone can also be used as a similar tool. These bones are generally found in pet supply stores and may be referred to as femur bones. The hollow bone can be stuffed using the same stuffing directions, and can offer continued enjoyment and activity after the contents of the center are emptied. It is important to keep in mind that some pets may have aggressive chew strength and could potentially ingest bone or toy material. **Pets should be monitored and supervised, at least initially, with all toys.** If a pet will chew off pieces of a product, then this product is not recommended for them.

What if I want to make my own activity toys?

Looking around your house, you can quickly see that activity toys can be made out of almost anything. Empty soda bottles and plastic milk jugs make excellent activity toys for those pets that will not destroy and ingest the materials. Punch multiple holes throughout the bottle and add dry dog food kibble or dry treats to the bottle. The amount of kibble will vary depending on the dog's needs and normal diet. Place the cap back securely on the bottle or discard cap if it may present a choking hazard for your dog. This activity toy should be used in large open spaces (inside home or outdoors) and may be difficult to use with dogs that are crated or kenneled. A PVC pipe can be utilized in much the same manner. The length of the tube used should be relative to the length of the dog; shorter pipe length and diameter for smaller dogs. Drill holes throughout the pipe in a random fashion; the holes should be slightly larger than the dog kibble. Fill with dry kibble. Then place caps on both ends of the pipe. Allow the dog to role the pipe in a large open area to dispense the kibble.

What should I put inside the activity toys?

The variety of stuffing recipes are much like enrichment toys and may be store bought or homemade. It is important to build the activity toy to the ability level of your pet. The goal is to keep your pet occupied and enjoy the toy without becoming frustrated or bored. Ideally, your goal should be to keep your pet engaged with the activity toy for 20 to 45 minutes. Follow the guidelines below to begin building your activity toy.



Photo courtesy of Premier Pet Products

Simple and beginners' level: Sticky, paste-like substances are often the best place to start when building your activity toy. They act as edible glue. Spread peanut butter, or squeeze cheese on the inside cavity of the activity toy. "Stuffin" by Kong company is a commercial product that is similar to cheese or peanut butter. These are easy and basic choices that most pets enjoy.

Medium level: Make a base or liner in the activity toy using peanut butter, or squeeze cheese, this should be spread thin. Add tiny pieces of dry treats, small dry kibble or semi moist dog food. Ideally, the added food should stick to the liner and increase the difficulty of the activity toy. Also, try plugging the small open end of the Kong or Squirrel Dude with peanut butter or something of this consistency. Then place the small end face down in an empty soup can. Fill the large open end of the toy with chicken broth and place the entire thing in the freezer. Pieces of dry kibble or small bits of chicken can also be added to the activity toy prior to freezing.

Advanced level: Dry dog food can be mixed with canned dog food and stuffed in any either the Kong, Squirrel Dude, or hollow bone. Less stuffing will make it easier, adding more stuffing will add difficulty. After the toy is stuffed it can then be frozen for additional increased difficulty.

Be creative with these recipes. Foods such as smashed bananas, mashed potatoes, yogurt, and cottage cheese also make good stuffing treats as long as they are acceptable and do not cause intestinal upset in your pet. Mix these items among themselves or with other items to find what is most enjoyable to your dog. Be sure to clean each toy thoroughly after each use. Follow the cleaning directions recommended in this handout. Be aware that some foods may spoil after sitting in the activity toys for a long period of time.

What can I do if my dog doesn't like the activity toys?

Some dogs will learn this new skill faster than others but all dogs can learn and will benefit from the use of food-based activity toys. If at first your dog isn't successful try these alternatives; make the toy easier to get food out of, use a more desirable food and limit or eliminate the amount of food a dog receives from a food bowl. Keep in mind that one or multiple activity toys can replace the food bowl and offer pets a mentally stimulating method to forage and hunt for each meal. After the pet has finished playing with the toy it is important to pick the toy up and remove it from the dog's visibility. By doing so, the toys remain novel and can teach the pet that these toys are special and not always available.

How do I keep the activity toys clean?

Activity toys should be cleaned and dried after each use so that they remain sanitary. Hollow toys can be easily cleaned with a bottle cleaner and dish soap. Most toys may be washed in a dishwasher or clothes washer.

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