

# The role of caretaker interactions in environmental enrichment for kenneled dogs

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## Introduction

Environmental enrichment has been defined as “an improvement in the biological functioning of captive animals resulting from modifications to their environment” (Newberry, 1995). While many people think of enrichment as simply provision of toys or treats to animals, many other aspects of an animal’s environment can be enhanced. These include considerations about the social environments that animals experience, such as whether they are maintained in single, paired, or larger group housing, or the types of interactions that are possible with animals of the same or of other species. In addition, enrichment encompasses the physical environment that is provided via toys, landscaping or other structures that animals can engage with, the sensory environment (e.g., sounds, smells, sights or surfaces), and the nutritional environment that is experienced. The latter refers not just to offering different types of food, but incorporating variation in how foods are presented, such as in puzzle feeders, or other ways that require the animal to work to gain access to them (Newberry, 1995; Hoy et al. 2010).

In determining the most suitable forms of enrichment to introduce, it is important to take into account the behavioral needs of the species being considered. For species that live in groups, such as dogs, introducing social enrichment can be an excellent choice. Doing so



can facilitate dogs engaging in behaviors they are highly motivated to perform, such as investigating each other, forming relationships, learning hierarchical behavior, and playing. One way to facilitate social interactions between dogs is through pair or group housing or assigned play periods. In some situations, however, dogs cannot be housed together. In cases where dogs’ access to each other must be limited or

prevented entirely for behavioral, medical, investigational or other reasons, it is still important for them to have some level of social contact and support. In these circumstances, positive human-animal interactions become particularly important.

## Human-animal interactions as a form of canine enrichment and support in kennels

In kennels housing large numbers of dogs, insufficient human-animal contact can become problematic. Scant human contact can contribute to poor welfare conditions for dogs, worsening problems arising from inadequate socialization and mental stimulation. Dogs that are not allowed appropriate social interactions of any kind may also be prevented from learning and expressing key behaviors that are important for normal social development and functioning. This may ultimately undermine their overall well-being.



For dogs maintained in kennels, positive daily interactions with caretakers may enhance the quality of life the animals experience, particularly in circumstances where dogs cannot interact with others of their own kind. Contact as simple as petting may be enriching to dogs. Evidence suggests that even brief incidents of this nature are viewed by dogs as valuable. For example, dogs tended to spend more time, during a five-minute session, in the proximity of a person who provided petting over vocal praise even when the person who provided the vocal praise was their owner and the person petting was a stranger (Feuerbacher and Wynne, 2015). Likewise, adult dogs from rescue organizations that were handled three times for only 10 minutes at a time had a higher tendency to seek contact with a handler than dogs that did not receive these sorts of interactions (Gácsi et al., 2001).

When dogs are maintained in kennels and even temporarily separated from their owners, such as can occur at veterinary clinics, shelters or rescues, they may be highly motivated to establish some sort of human contact. Therefore, positive, tactile contact with caretakers may offer an easily implemented and significant form of support for dogs coping with separation from their owners.

### **Additional benefits of positive caretaker interactions with dogs**

Petting and other social interactions, such as playing, walking on a leash, basic obedience training, or grooming, can yield physiological benefits for dogs, such as reduced levels of stress hormones. Dogs provided these types of interactions for about 45 minutes on their second day at a county humane society had lower salivary cortisol concentrations compared to dogs that received no additional human interaction (Coppola et al., 2006). This indicates that human interactions can help to mitigate some stress in dogs that are transitioning into unfamiliar environments.

Promoting positive social interactions with dogs can have additional welfare benefits both for them and the facilities that house them. Shelter dogs that were provided basic obedience training were 1.4 times more likely to be adopted than untrained dogs (Luescher et al., 2009). Caretakers who engage in positive reinforcement training of dogs may help not just to improve obedience, but also to reduce fearfulness, which increas-



es the likelihood of dogs approaching strangers. This in turn improves their chances of being adopted (Wells and Hepper, 2000).

Over time, dogs have adapted their social behavior to interact with and interpret human signals (Feddersen-Petersen, 2007). Most dogs are motivated to be around people. Providing social interactions of a nature that is preferable to dogs may also prevent frustration, which is a negative mental state that can lead to undesirable behaviors, such as destruction of the environment (Lund et al., 1999). This type of behavior can result in injury to dogs as well as increased costs to the facility. Thus, human interactions that help to relieve frustration and promote positive mental states in dogs may yield benefits, such as reduced facility expenditures, in addition to improving dog well-being.

### **Benefits of positive interaction for caretakers**

Caretakers can also benefit from appropriate interaction with kennel dogs. Caretakers with positive attitudes toward animals, who observed and interacted with pigs gently and in a manner pleasurable to the animals — e.g., talking to, stroking, or petting them — elicited desirable pig behavioral outcomes, such as shorter latencies to approach and longer times spent interacting with an experimenter (Coleman et al., 2000). Likewise, higher milk yields have been reported in dairy cow herds where caretakers had positive individual interactions with the animals (Bertenshaw and Rowlinson,

2009). Similar outcomes may occur for kenneled dogs and staff charged with caring for them. Regular, positive social interactions with dogs can also help caretakers become more knowledgeable about each animal's tendencies and behavior patterns, allowing for interventions tailored to meet individual dogs' needs. This can help caretakers provide more information to new staff members about how to safely interact with individual dogs, or to visitors looking to adopt them. Comprehensive investigations of the welfare benefits to dogs and people as a function of specific types of human-animal interactions are needed to better understand the effects of these types of social enrichment.

### Conclusion

The enrichment that caretakers provide to dogs can be invaluable for any establishment. These interactions do not have to be expensive and can be incorporated into a regular routine to provide the consistency and predictability needed for dogs to feel secure and comfortable in their environments. Positive interactions can also promote bonding between dogs and caretakers, which may result in reduced stress, improved behaviors and adoption rates for dogs as well as improved caretaker morale and job satisfaction. In short, when positive human-animal interactions occur in kennels, both caretakers and dogs are likely to experience improvements in their quality of life.

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