



## British Behaviorist and Author Shay Kelly Shares His Favorite Enrichment Activities and Explains Why Enrichment Is a Top Priority for Dogs



**UK Behaviorist Shay Kelly is the author of two books and is considered around the world to be the “Canine Enrichment Guru.” He runs a very popular canine enrichment group on Facebook.**

► **You write in your book that from a dog’s perspective, not everything done to help a dog is actually enriching for the dog, such as nail trims or stressful groomer or vet visits (even though these things do improve the quality of their lives). How do you describe things that are truly enriching for a dog?**

What is truly enriching for a dog are those activities that increase their positive affective state and emotional well-being. It’s not just giving dogs something to do, and it’s not only about providing something “extra.” *Fundamentally, enrichment is about providing for a dog’s behavioral needs.* When we start to think about what these behavioral needs are we see that an enriched life is about much more than a particular activity. For example, dogs need to be able to have some choices.

At first this can sound strange; why do dogs need choices? Humans tend to control everything—what time to go for a walk, where to walk, who they meet, the training class, enrichment activities, what they eat, when they eat, and almost everything else in the dog’s life. There are good reasons why we are the ones making many of the choices, but no animal on earth evolved to have all their decisions made by another species. Choice can be provided for in simple ways, for example, allowing the dog to stop and sniff as much as they want to on walks, or providing additional sleeping places around the home so the dog can choose which room they want to sleep in.

Other behavioral needs include bonding, interaction, and having a place of safety. I increasingly believe that enrichment is about looking after the dog's mental health. An interactive food dispensing toy (for example a traditional KONG or K9 Connectable) does much more than just giving the dog something to do. If the dog is successful (and we must ensure that they are) we are facilitating their ability to interact and achieve reinforcement; we're exercising that fantastic brain in ways that will make them happy and optimistic (because their behavior works) and improve their well-being—it's the brain doing what the brain evolved to do.

### ► **How does canine enrichment affect the human-canine bond?**

Enrichment can improve the bond in many ways. For example, if the dog's behavioral needs are being met, they will be in a much better state of mind. Not only that but creating enrichment opportunities and interacting with them is also beneficial to the human half of the partnership. It's not often seen as a chore; most dog guardians enjoy the process. When formally training dogs, we can easily become stressed if we are not getting the results we want; however, in enrichment we are not usually looking for an exact behavior and the dog is free to choose how to respond. We get to interact or just enjoy the dog without any stress. The more the dog associates us with these enjoyable and stress-free events, the more the bond will grow.

However, I must emphasize that all the good associations made during enriching activities can easily be undone if the dog is treated harshly in other circumstances. Fundamentally, the dog must be able to trust that we will not hurt them. An analogy I often give to illustrate the point is as follows: you have a boss who buys you coffee and cakes three times per week, but on the other days they yell and threaten you. You may continue to accept the coffee and cake, and you may be relieved to find them in a good mood, but you surely don't bond with or even trust them.

### ► **Why do dogs need enrichment? Can they provide their own enrichment or is it up to the owner to do that for the dog?**

Dogs make fantastic companions, and we don't usually think of them as being captive animals; however, the fact remains that their freedoms are fairly limited when compared with how they might behave if they had the freedom to do as they pleased. I realize that people are increasingly opposed to keeping animals in zoos; however, it is expected that animals that are kept in zoos be provided with suitable enrichment. If zoos neglected to do so, it would be unlikely for the zoo to retain their license to operate. Why should we expect less for companion animals?

Dogs have a fantastic brain that is capable of so many amazing tasks. We just need to look at the number of roles that dogs have been employed for by humans over the years to see just how smart that brain is. However, in many homes, the dog's brain is left unemployed. Enrichment fulfills it. Enrichment gives the dog's life meaning, without which depression can easily become the norm (although often going unrecognized in dogs). Essentially enrichment may be the difference between poor mental well-being and good mental well-being, and who doesn't deserve the latter? I don't believe that dogs can provide their own enrichment. The very reason enrichment is needed is because they live with us. Wild animals spend a great deal of their time acquiring food and surviving; this need has been removed for dogs by us humans, so it is our responsibility to fill the behavioral void with enrichment.



Enrichment can be as simple as throwing a handful of food or a few treats on the floor to create a quick mini treasure hunt!

► **What are some of your personal favorite enrichment activities using food? And what are some of your favorites that don't involve food?**

I never feed dogs from bowls as I think this is a wasted opportunity for them to use their fantastic brains and gain reinforcement and enrichment at the same time. I weigh their food out each day and keep it in a container so I know exactly how much they are eating. With some of it, I will make a scavenger hunt by hiding it around the house and sending the dog to find it. I also hide items with particular scents on them (I like to use catnip for this) to find and for doing so they receive a handful of their food. For me, there is nothing in the dog world so awesome as watching a dog homing in on a scent. Apart from this, I like items I can stuff with wet food, such as the Toppl or K9 Connectable. These allow the dog some independence as they work to get the food out.

For non-food enrichment, I like to just stand and watch the dogs sniff when out on a walk. I also like to find things that suit the particular breed. For my Labrador (Mr. B) this might be splashing about in a shallow stream. On the other hand, my West Highland Terrier (Daisy) loves a sandy area where she can dig. I love to use food for enrichment, but it

is important to remember that it shouldn't always be about food—just sitting on the floor giving the dogs a belly rub can be a great bonding experience.

► **Can you please share some free or inexpensive ways to provide enrichment for dogs?**

My favorite free activities are wrapping up the dog's food in a tea-towel or doing the food "treasure hunt." Probably the greatest difference we can make is simply allowing dogs the time to stop and sniff when out walking, and of course giving them a safe environment and making them part of the family. Dogs don't need a lot of expensive enrichment equipment; what they need is their human to treat them respectfully and take responsibility for meeting their needs. You can literally throw a handful of food across the floor and create a great experience for the dog, searching around for every last piece. Another favorite is to place a handful of food in old cereal boxes and let the dog rip them open, before recycling them. Some caution is needed here however as we must ensure the dog will not consume the cardboard and that it is free of toxins. This should only be done with very dry food, such as kibble; wet food will soak into the cardboard and may make it indistinguishable from the food.