

Both Ends of the Leash

Take Two Giggles and Call Me in the Morning: Enrichment activities are stimulating for you and your dog

Patricia B. McConnell

If you love your dog, you owe a lot to the lowly rat. That's rat as in rodent, not as in Rat Terrier. In addition to being the front-line soldiers in decades of learning experiments, white laboratory rats taught us how important an enriched environment is to the life of a healthy, normal dog.

Researchers found that the brains of rats raised in sterile environments developed differently than those of rats raised in enriched environments. It seems that the lack of stimulation led to a congruent lack of connections between brain cells (called “dendritic branching”). Researchers quickly learned that this phenomenon not only affected individuals of many species, but that early deprivation led to profound and often irreversible effects on their behavior as adults.

And what does this have to do with the pup at your feet, who just got back from flyball class, gets organic free-range chicken every night and has a bevy of interactive toys that rival those found in a kindergarten classroom? Lots, because knowing how much stimulation an animal really needs is important to those of us who want to do right by our dogs but can't afford to retire and spend our entire day in their service.

The beginning is a good place to start, and here the message is crystal clear. Puppies who grow up in sterile, unvarying environments have a higher likelihood of not being able to cope with any kind of change as adults. Ironically, this means that many of the kennels that most impress the public are the worst possible environments for a developing puppy. When I talk to my clients about where they got their puppy, I'm struck by how many of them stress how clean the kennel was. “Did the puppy get out and



about on the grass, in the house, on the gravel driveway?” I ask. They often don't know the answer to that question, but they know that the kennel floor looked spotless.

Americans are obsessed with the appearance of cleanliness (just ask a European). We don't allow dogs in restaurants, on buses or in stores, even though most of us have one or more in our kitchen. The motivation for this tradition was not a concern about dog bites, it was the belief that dogs are dirty and might spread “germs.” Once we discovered that “germs” are everywhere and that some of them correlate with certain diseases, we went on an all-out war against them. “Cleanliness is next to godliness” pretty well sums it up. Americans became so fixated on cleanliness that an early and profoundly influential behaviorist, John Watson, actually advised mothers never to kiss their babies. Kissing spreads germs and was therefore to be avoided at all costs. (Not to mention that it probably reinforces the wrong behavior, a double whammy that could lead, in his words, to “invalidism” in a child.)

Thus Americans learned to get a puppy from a clean environment, because a clean environment meant a better chance of a healthy puppy raised by responsible breeders. And there's no doubt that a clean environment is important to a healthy puppy. But the extreme of “clean” is “sterile,” and sterile, it turns out, is only valuable if you're doing surgery. Sterile environments provide so little sensory stimulation that they literally deform developing brains. So the lesson from our poor, long-suffering laboratory rat is to balance cleanliness with environmental variety when choosing or raising a

puppy. When I bred Border Collies, by the time they were four weeks old, my puppies had been on towels, carpets, straw, grass, gravel and wood floors. I kept their puppy pen as clean as I could, but I was just as concerned about providing them with variety as I was with keeping them clean. At five weeks of age, they went on clumsy adventures up the rocky hill path, through the grassy sheep pasture and down through the woods. Granted, it took us half an hour to do what was usually a 10-minute walk, but I spent the time being charmed, and the puppies developed essential neuronal connections that would help them cope with both major and minor stresses (read change) as adults.

Sterility is an equal-opportunity employer, it's not just puppy-mill puppies growing up in hanging wire cages who suffer from it. I've met far too many dogs from "reputable breeders" whose dogs live in kennels 24/7 and whose puppies get good healthy food, spanking clean kennels and little else. Don't get me wrong, I have no problem with dogs living in kennels if they get lots of time out to learn, socialize and explore the world. Neither am I advocating getting your puppy from some squalid Deliverance-like setting. I am saying that we need to do a better job of educating breeders and buyers about the importance of environmental enrichment during canine development. (Keep in mind that you can take this too far and do harm to a puppy by overstimulating him. Puppies, like infants, need lots and lots of quiet naptime. A little bit of adventure goes a long way with a six-week-old pup.)

But what about mature dogs? If you have an adult dog, or like many of us, an entire pack of them, how much "environmental enrichment" should you be providing? This is, of course, a tricky question, because the answer depends upon the breed, age and personality of your dog. A one-year-old Border Collie needs about 100 times more stimulation than a six-year-old retired racing Greyhound. Or would that be 500 times? Let's just leave it that adolescent individuals of working breeds require just about as much physical exercise as you can provide.

But physical exercise is only one component of the stimulation a dog needs every day. It seems everyone knows that their dog needs to be physically active for part of the day, although too many people define "activity" as a short on-leash walk around the

block. (Snore.) Brains need to be exercised too, and that's where many of us could do better by our dogs. Dogs evolved to solve problems and make decisions: Should we go hunting here or over there? Should we start running at the herd now or wait until they get closer? Will my aunt let me snatch a piece of the elk we just killed, or should I wait?

There's nothing like learning something new to stimulate a brain, so if you're wondering about the quality of your dog's life, ask yourself what new information your dog has had to master in the recent past. Right now, I'm teaching all of my dogs a new trick (and enjoying comparing how each one learns differently and at a different pace). Two of my dogs are 13 and the youngest is nine, but that doesn't mean that they don't love learning a new trick, and that they don't need stimulation in their day. The beauty of tricks is that you can teach them in any kind of weather, no small advantage in some parts of the country, and you can always come up with a new one. It doesn't take much of your time, and a little bit goes a long way. I learned the value of training tricks one brutal Wisconsin winter when the chill factor was 50 below for days on end. That's a bit much even for me and the Border Collies, so in a desperate attempt to keep my working dogs busy, I substituted trick training for long walks in the country. To my amazement, they seemed more relaxed and slept longer after 20 minutes of that than they did after a walk twice as long.

When you think about it, it makes intuitive sense. We get tired when our brains are learning new things, and for good reason. When you're learning, you're using your brain's frontal cortex, an energy hog that beats SUVs hands-down for its fuel needs. Once you've learned a behavior, the mental machinery that powers it moves out the frontal cortex into areas of the brain that consume less energy. Pretty slick system, and a good reminder of why learning something new can either overpower a dog (if too much) or enhance the quality of her life.

But new isn't all that's important. If you love doing something, it doesn't have to be new to be fun. I'm always amazed at agility class participants who think their dog would be bored by the next session of agility because they won't learn anything new. This is usually said by someone whose dog adores agility and can barely wait to get onto the course. The

obsession with dog classes presenting new material every week doesn't make any sense when you think about it – if you love tennis or gold or walking in the country with your dog, your enjoyment isn't dependent upon whether you learn something new each time. What's relevant is whether or not you love doing it. We could all use a little more fun in our lives, and so could many of our dogs. Dogs like to have fun too, and it's up to every responsible dog owner to provide it for them. Of course, what fun looks like depends on your dog – it might be hunting mice or playing ball or dashing through an agility course – but light-hearted play is good for the soul in all of us. If you need help figuring out what lights up your dog's eyes, just ask yourself what it is your dog does that starts you giggling. There's nothing more engaging than a dog having a rip-roaring good time, and if you start laughing on the outside, there's a good chance your dog is laughing on the inside.

The question remains: How much of all these things do dogs really need? Should we feel guilty if our dogs' day doesn't include two hour-long walks off-leash in the country, an hour of trick training, lots of time playing with all those cool new interactive toys, a cozy nap on an orthopedic bed in the afternoon and flyball class at night? Well, you could, but I wouldn't. Yes, that would be a wonderful day for a lot of dogs, but it would be a wonderful day for their humans too, and most of us can't manage it. Sometimes, I think the world of dog lovers is divided into two groups: those who think a good dinner, a yearly vet visit and a walk around the block is a good life for a dog, and those who can't do enough for their dogs, dedicating all their spare time to their pooches' health and entertainment. Surely the key here is balance – a life that includes a certain amount of routine balanced with some surprise and adventure, a certain amount of rest balanced with the stimulation of mental and physical exercise, and daily doses of pure, exquisite fun. I can't tell you exactly how much of everything your dog needs. (Sorry. That's the question I'd be asking right now.) The answer depends too much on your dog as an individual for a generalized prescription to be of any value. But it also depends on your ability to provide for him or her, so unless you're living a life of luxury, I wouldn't indulge in feeling guilty because you can't do everything you'd like for your dog. Just remember that our friends need to keep their brains and bodies engaged on a daily basis, even if for brief

periods of time, and just like us, they'll be happiest if you can help them find that exquisite balance of quiet contentment and joyful exuberance. So ask yourself if your dog is getting mental and physical exercise, the stimulation of learning new things and a good solid dose of fun. If she is, good for you. If not, don't become wracked with guilt, just figure out what you can reasonably do to improve things. Meanwhile, go have a giggle with your dog for me. (Insert here, Cyndi Lauper singing “Dogs just wanna have fu—un!”)

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