

Fun with Fido: Enrichment 101

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We get it – life is busy. Between work, maybe school, family, friends, relationships, and just adulting in general, it can be tough to take time for yourself. What we mustn't forget, however, is that it's not just people that need "me" time and fun activities to stay healthy and keep our brains sharp – our pets need it, too! Critters can get bored just as easily as humans, and as their people, it's up to us to help curb that boredom. Luckily for us, there's lots of fun and easy ways to do this!

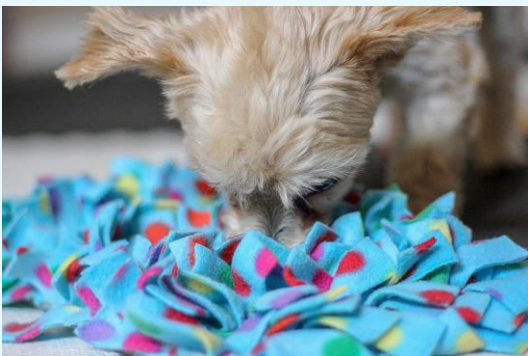
en-rich-ment *noun*

1. the action of improving or enhancing the quality or value of something.

One of our favourite parts about caring for animals in the shelter is providing them with enrichment – fun toys, games, and activities that provides mental stimulation and physical activity! Enrichment is very important in keeping your pet happy, healthy, and active. When I started to research a variety of enrichment tools that pet owners can try at home, I figured there's no better source for great ideas than the biggest animal lovers you'll find anywhere – our own staff at the Saskatoon SPCA! Most of us have at least one pet of our own and are self-declared enrichment experts, so enjoy the following tried-and-true ideas for you to offer your own furry family members.

"There are a ton of ideas and information out there. I believe enrichment is such an important part of a dog's (or any animal's) wellbeing and overall quality of life!" – Mandi, Adoption Counsellor

Enrichment Tools and Toys



Like most dogs, staff member Mandi's dog Eli loves mealtime. Feeding can be an excellent opportunity to provide your dog with enrichment opportunities. In this photo, Eli is searching for his kibble in a snuffle mat!

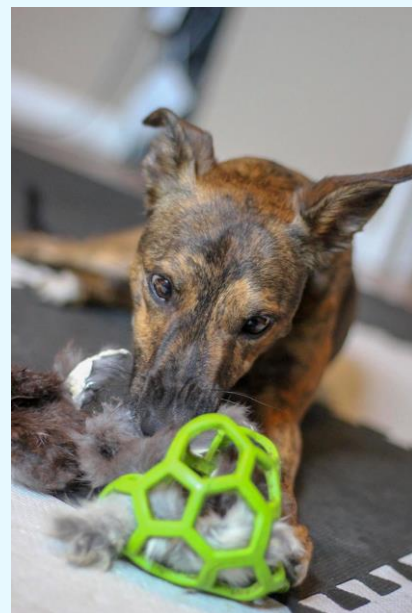
"A snuffle mat occupies their brain in a positive way as they search and scavenge for food. There are so many ways to use snuffle mats – in crates to promote calm behaviour, in environments that may be scary or high arousal for a dog, and as a tool to aid in reactivity since their brain is being occupied

by good, calm things. And of course, eating food releases those feel-good hormones in their bodies. There are plenty of DIY instructions on how to make your own snuffle mats."

Here at the shelter, we have two favourite go-to enrichment toys involving food that we give the critters in our care on a regular basis. For cats, we put dry cat kibble in [treat dispensing balls](#), which creates a fun little “puzzle” for cats to roll around in order to free bits of kibble one at a time. For dogs, we stuff [rubber Kong toys](#) with wet dog food and pop them in the freezer for a cold treat they can lick away at – a “pupsicle”, if you will!

Not all enrichment tools need to involve food. Mandi’s dog Wylder loves a popular toy called the [Holee Roller](#), which she stuffs little pieces of fur inside for him to pull out and play with – take a look!

“The fur provides some enrichment with the smell and texture, but also kind of a ‘ripping and shredding’ activity that dogs love. Another idea is to roll pieces of food or treats in scraps of fabric and stuff the ball. Let the pups scavenge for their food!”



[Click here](#) for more information on enrichment from Mandi’s favourite dog training blogger!



“This is our little ‘confidence box’, filled with whatever random things we can find – toilet paper rolls, tied up plastic bags, bits of recycling,” says Mandi. “I love this one for Lux. She is my super timid dog who is afraid of strange noises, strange objects, and things that move. She absolutely loves this one. I can change up what I put in the box to have her interact with things that make noise. She has actually started bringing me noisy little pieces of plastic recycling, that would have been scary before – she brings them to me to play with her and she crunches them enthusiastically in her mouth – all because she has been able to interact with these items at her own pace. It has boosted her confidence and made them a lot less scary!”



Our friends at [Arlington Animal Hospital](#) want to remind everyone that while some enrichment toys do require a lot of work to assemble or may be expensive to purchase, enrichment for indoor cats in particular really doesn't need to be complex. Cardboard boxes and paper bags can provide hours of fun for your cat, while being both convenient and virtually free! Other great cat enrichment toys include [Kong Kickaroos](#), laser pointers, and the always popular fish-pole style teaser toys.

“While enrichment for cats doesn't need to be high tech, it does need to be safe. Supervision is needed when cats are interacting with enrichment items.” – Arlington Animal Hospital



The cats in my family love playing in boxes and bags – even nestling in and under fluffy sheets while you're trying to make the bed can provide enrichment for your cat!

Trusty Catnip... and alternatives!

[Catnip](#) is a widely available and commonly used enrichment treat for felines. Catnip can act as both a stimulant or a sedative depending on if its smelled or ingested and provides a perfectly safe and non-addictive “high” for your kitty. Catnip is great for relieving stress and encouraging affectionate and playful behaviours. Unfortunately, not all cats have a reaction to catnip. If the ‘nip isn’t doing the trick for your kitty, consider the following safe alternatives!

- [Valerian root](#) is a very effective stimulant to cats, and is known for its calming and relaxation-inducing properties. Valerian extract can be purchased at most [natural health food stores](#).
- [Silvervine](#) is a potent alternative to catnip that has shown to solicit positive reactions in nearly 80% of cats! It can be purchased online in both a powder and a stick form.



My cat, Sammy, enjoying her cat grass.

➤ [Cat grass](#) is my kitty's personal favourite to sniff and chew away at and is great for indoor cats who otherwise wouldn't be able to nibble at grass outdoors (which is a totally natural behaviour for cats). What we call cat grass is simply young grass from wheat, oat, or barley seed; most pet stores sell cat grass planters, but if you have your own planter and soil, the seed can be purchased in bulk at [Early's Farm and Garden Centre](#) here in Saskatoon! An added benefit of cat grass is that it provides your cat with an alternative to getting into your houseplants, which may be toxic for them to ingest.

Enrichment Activities

The best part about lots of enrichment activities with your pets is that you can participate in the fun, too! The City of Saskatoon has a great number of beautiful [off-leash dog parks](#) that can give your canine friends a chance to run out their energy and gain positive socialization with other friendly dogs. New sights, smells, and textures in a dog's environment can provide excellent opportunities to exercise their curiosity in a safe and secure environment. [Click here](#) to listen to Mandi's favourite podcast about the benefits of decompression walks!

"I do "canicross"! It's essentially cross-country running with your dog harnessed to you, whilst pulling you and propelling you forward (making you super fast). It evolved through training sled dogs through the dry/warm seasons. It's a huge sport in Quebec!" – Sonia, Adoption Counsellor



Saskatoon SPCA Adoption Counsellor Sonia runs canicross with her dog, Atticus.

Now that you've had a chance to learn about some fun enrichment ideas for the felines and canines in your life, we'd like to hear your ideas! What do you provide your pets to help them unwind and be their goofy selves? [Send us a message](#) with your creative enrichment tools and activities!

