

Relating toys to what your pet does naturally is the best way to brainstorm new ideas for enrichment. Listening to a radio podcast on parrots, enrichment guru Robin Shewokis discussed the different categories toys and devices can fall into. Below I have included examples for all types of pets, in each of the categories. Enrichment is not just a buzzword; it is something all thoughtful pet owners should employ.

Enrichment is not a toy that you give your pet once a week, month or year. It is a something novel that improves your pets' physical and mental well being.

Sometimes thinking outside of the box — or cage — can do wonders. Our pets explore their world through their five senses just like us, and we can use this information to our advantage when coming up with original enrichment.

The first category is foraging. What are your pet's natural food-gathering strategies? If your pet is a predator in the wild, how can we replicate that?

Puppies and kittens have a lot of energy. Before you throw out anything, ask yourself how you can incorporate that into a foraging device. Earlier this week I was reminded of the benefits of water bottles. With the caps and plastic rings removed they make great — and free — food dispensers. Filling up an empty water bottle with some cat treats or dog food will keep those pets occupied for a while. Remember food is not on plates in the wild, and animals out there are constantly figuring out how to retrieve food.

In addition to kong-type feeder puzzles another simple and free solution are ice treats. Freezing some kibble in an ice cube or freezing low sodium broth are great for dogs. Freezing vegetable and fruit chunks in different shaped containers are good for small mammals and birds. If you place a metal chain or string in the ice treat, you can hang it in the enclosure.

Another category of enrichment is self maintenance. A large portion of a wild animal's time is spent grooming. Reptiles sun and soak themselves, canines and felines groom each other and birds' bathe in the rain or in puddles.

By cleaning themselves they keep their hygiene and appearances up. Giving your pet options to clean themselves can be rewarding for both parties involved.

Watching my cats groom each other is relaxing to me and watching my bird enjoy a spray bottle bath is fun. Generally birds only bathe when they feel very comfortable. By focusing on preening they are more susceptible to predators because they have let their guard down. When I see my bird bathing indoors I know she is not worried about anything in her surroundings.

The third enrichment grouping is the five senses.

We use some of our senses so much, we often don't have to think about it. We move things around and change colors to appease our visual senses. When cooking we use foods with strong aromas to get our appetite moving. We change the volume and track in our car to hear our

favorite songs. We wear shoes to go over hard and rough surfaces and line our houses with sleek woods and fluffy carpets.

Changing our pets' environment with the senses in mind can be a cheap, yet substantial adjustment. Changing the location and view of a pet's cage, the substrate they walk on daily or scents they encounter are some ideas to get you started.

Adding and substituting an animal's diet is a common category of enrichment. I will not go too far into this category because this one I feel many pet caregivers utilize. Before changing or adding to a diet I would consult a veterinarian. If your pet can eat carrots, for example, how are those carrots presented? I can think of eight for starters; whole carrots, minced, shredded, chopped, baby carrots, carrot sticks, steamed and roasted.

Another category of enrichment is intelligence or stimulation. Training an animal is enrichment. The animal adjusts its behavior in order to get praise or food. In the wild they would have to adjust their behavior to join a pack or flock without difficulty or to gain access to food. Feeder puzzles or toys inside toys also fall into this category. Another fun activity that falls under this group is social interaction. Taking your pet to meet conspecifics — or animals in the same species — at a park or class is enriching.

Environmental changes in your pet's life can also be rewarding. Rearranging cage furnishings, like toys or food dishes can increase your pet's physical and mental stimulation. By moving them around your pet has to think of the location where the food bowl is, rather than robotically going to the old location. And if you have to go to a department store and buy a new couch, chairs, plasma TV and recliner with drink holders on the side, for your pet's environmental enrichment, so be it.

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