

# Enriching Our Dogs' Lives

By Karen Peak

## West Wind Dog Training

The exasperated caller complained that his dog was escaping his yard, digging and fence running. The dog was becoming a neighborhood nuisance and driving him crazy. I pressed a bit and asked about the environment the dog lived in. All I got was the dog had a yard to play in. I asked about toys, attention, opportunity to get out with other dogs, etc. The owner grew silent. He thought all a dog needed was a yard to run in. Sadly, this is a common misconception. Dogs are not lawn ornaments. Dogs without stimulation and alone in yards grow bored. Dogs are thinking creatures with natural instincts such as digging, chasing, and tearing. Dogs are also social creatures and do best when part of a pack. We humans have to be this pack as we make the decision to bring dogs into our lives. To deprive a dog use of his basic instincts and social needs is to create problems. This dog was escaping the yard because he was bored. He had no toys, little interaction and was developing undesired and even dangerous behaviors. (What if a car came by the day he ran into the street or he was seen harassing someone's pets and was shot?) I explained in detail how the man could enrich his dog's life and alleviate the boredom as well as stopping the developing "bad" behaviors. Again, silence and then, "Well, the dog is too much work, maybe I should get rid of him." Obviously even simple steps to helping his dog were too much for this owner. However, recognizing boredom and working to prevent it are part of responsible dog owning. In zoos, creating a stimulating environment is called "Enrichment." Moreover, at home, we must enrich.

Part of enriching our dogs' lives is proper socialization. Living in the suburbs is great as we (and I am a suburban person) have the best of both worlds. Yards and open space but the luxury of having shopping and other amenities nearby! This should be a boon to our dogs! We can get them out and in a variety of places so they learn about life and how to handle many situations. I can go from wooded trails with wildlife to downtown Washington, D.C. within twenty minutes! We also have yards and homes we can enrich to help our dogs not be bored. However, living in the suburbs tends to make some dog owners lazy!

Many suburban, and to a greater extent country, dogs lack in adequate socializing as owners have the luxury of a yard for the dogs to go out in. There is no need seen to walk the dogs. Personally, my dogs have about 5,000 square feet fenced for their use. However, walks are vital for socializing opportunities. How else can the dog learn that the world does not have to be feared? It is amazing what dogs will view as a threat and either shy from or snap at trying to escape that threat. Often, I get calls from people who will not walk their dogs as the dogs lunge at bikes, other dogs, etc. By denying the walks, the owner is denying a great training and socializing opportunity. The owner develops a cycle – dog lunges, owner stops walks, and dog does not learn to ignore bikes, owner tried again in a few months hoping dog grew out if it, dog lunges, owner stops walks... Getting the dog out and building confidence in the world, the dog becomes less likely to respond adversely. Dogs in the city, those that are well cared for, get several walks a

day. This means they are out and about various people, hear and see traffic, learn to ignore bikes, walk over different surfaces and get to go to dog parks! Though many think keeping dogs in the city is cruel, the opportunity for the dog to be better socialized than a suburban or country dog is far greater! From a socializing standpoint, city life can be wonderful! It is amazing how many dogs I see in class who are bothered by simple things such as a person in a hood or a flapping coat! Why? These dogs may never get to experience them regularly. Some of the dogs that come through my classes have never even been out of their yards. Yet in the suburbs, we have access to so many opportunities and environments if we are just willing to take the time and get out!

Dogs who are bored tend to develop destructive and annoying behaviors such as barking, chewing, and digging. The dogs are not getting back at humans; they are just trying to entertain themselves. Dogs who spend all day alone and isolated from the pack may develop barking problems as well as become escape artists. The owner views the dog as hard to handle, trying to "get back at me" and refuse to take him out even more as a form of punishment for not behaving. This does nothing but exacerbate the situation. The dog is not being given the opportunity to learn and he is being even more socially deprived. The dog has no idea why he is being deprived or punished. All he knows is frustration. Is this fair? When it comes to socializing, people in the suburbs and country have to work harder and not allow themselves to fall into the rut of abusing the yard!

One way to get dogs out and around other dogs in a social environment is through training classes. Ideally, training in classes should begin as soon as pup has completed his 12-week or ten-week shots depending on the schedule your vet uses. (Some vets go 6, 9, 12 and others 6, 8, 10, but pup should have three sets of shots before starting classes for his own health). A good puppy-k program will emphasize socializing and give you ideas how to better socialize pup. Even a good adult program will teach socializing and what should be done. Another great way to socialize is through sports. Agility, Flyball and such gets dogs active with other dogs and working around them. Another way to socialize is going to dog parks. Many communities have them. And if not, have friends with social dogs get together once a week for a play date at a house with a fenced yard. Isolation from his own kind is misery for a dog.

Now, what about enriching our own homes for our dogs? Dogs view the world as a chew toy until we teach them what they can and cannot chew. A dog that is totally deprived of stimulus will find his own entertainment. That antique chair may fall victim to boredom and lack of training. The dog is not bad or trying to get even, he is just trying to fill a void. There are a variety of things we can do to fill this void and let our dogs act out the natural behaviors of chasing, chewing, tearing and digging. Toys and bones you can fill with a tasty treat are one way to alleviate boredom and let a dog be a dog. Kong toys, hollow bones and such can be stuffed with a bit of spread cheese, spread meats, cheese cubes, hot dog chunks, semi-soft dog treats, canned dog food, etc. The dog gets to work and chew to get the treat out. If you hide these toys, the dog gets to enjoy the hunt and seek for a reward. Sturdy chew toys (hard-pressed rawhide, ropes, etc.) also allow for chewing. However, chewing is not enough to alleviate boredom. A toilet paper or paper towel tube with some kibble put in it and the ends crumpled allow the dog to tear into a

toy. A clean milk jug with the top off and kibble dropped in lets the dog throw, tear, and tackle. Buster Cubes and similar toys have various compartments inside that kibbles rolls about in. Sometimes the kibble comes out. Feed your dog one of his daily meals or even both in this fashion (works well if you have a single dog, for multiple dogs I use stuffed bones). Games of hide and seek are wonderful! One person hides and another gets the dog to go find. Once the hiding person is found, a toy is tossed for the dog. Alternatively, hide a toy for the dog to find. Start simple (behind a chair in the same room) and build up the complexity (up the stairs and down the hall and under a box in your room). Take a bunch of plastic or paper cups and lay them out mouth down. Put a treat under just one cup and encourage the dog to find the treat.

How about enriching our yards for our dogs? A strong rope tied to a tree with heavy bungee cords lets the dog pull and tug. Big boxes make great tunnels and many dogs will fit through the play tunnels sold at many human toy stores. Small logs and lengths of PVC pipe (4" and 5" diameter) can be laid down for the dog to walk and jump over while playing. (For safety, dogs under 12 – 18 months of age should have all jumps very low). Make a digging area for your dog! Lay down a 4'x4' box and fill it with a soft sand and dirt mix. Encourage your dog to dig here and not in your garden. Use landscaping timbers to mark off the dog's digging box. A toy buried or some kibble sprinkled over the area can help redirect his digging from your Azaleas to his personal digging spot! Build a couple platforms for your dog to jump on and crawl under (just keep away from fences, as some dogs will learn to use these as means to escape). Get out and play fetch with various toys to allow your dog to engage in chasing behaviors. Take a box, hide treats in it and drag it through the yard on a rope (you stay still, just drag the box). This allows the dog to chase and tackle! These are all things that we can do to help enrich our dogs' lives. In addition, if you have a higher- to high-energy breed, these games are wonderful for burning off that energy! Get creative. However, monitor toy use and if you suspect a toy is not suited for your dog, do not use it. There is no toy ideal for all dogs and safety with toys is essential!

Boredom in dogs leads to undesired behaviors. However, enriching their environment, getting them socialized and understanding that we make our dogs what they are goes a long way in making our lives together happy and healthy.