



ALL ABOUT ENRICHMENT

ENRICHMENT – it’s a popular concept in pet care today. As pet parents, we know that enrichment is valuable and can help us provide the best quality of life to our pets... but what is it, really? Read on for a quick overview of enrichment and some fun tips on how to incorporate it into your pet’s daily routine.

Enrichment is defined as any activity that makes something more meaningful, valuable or rewarding. When applied to pet care, enrichment improves the overall quality of life for your pet by providing for their needs physically, nutritionally, and behaviorally.

By mimicking natural environments and activities, we can give our furry family members the best of both worlds!



PHYSICAL ENRICHMENT

Physical enrichment involves introducing anything into your pet’s daily routine that encourages physical activity in instinctual and challenging ways. The best form of physical enrichment is oftentimes the simplest. Make a daily habit of getting your pet out of his or her enclosure for some supervised exercise in a new environment (think a pet-proofed room or even a safe and supervised time outside!). Always take the necessary precautions to ensure your pet is safe – inside or out.

Other Great Enrichment Items Include:

commonly available cat toys with bells, towels tied to the outside of a pet’s habitat, toilet paper tubes filled with hay, and healthy treats.



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How to create an Enriching Habitat



Lay out your pet’s habitat in a way that encourages him or her to move and explore as much as possible on a daily basis.



Offer a variety of paper materials for your pet to tear up such as cardboard boxes, phone books, and newspaper.



Small pets love to hide and explore. To support this behavior, create various kinds of tunnels using cardboard boxes or other safe, handy materials. Woven hay habitats such as Oxbow’s Timothy CLUB Bungalow and Tunnel are great options that add an element of nutritional enrichment in the form of Timothy hay.

Supporting behavioral enrichment includes the encouragement of natural behaviors such as chewing, hiding and digging. Here are some easy and beneficial ways to support your pet's instinctual behaviors in and around the habitat:

Chewing

Most small pets will chew on almost anything, so it's important to provide safe, enriching options. Great options include: a variety of fresh hays (available at all times), wood blocks, cardboard, apple sticks, woven hay accessories, etc. Quick tip: some pets do not enjoy loose pieces of wood, but will happily interact with a "baseboard" that is safely attached to an areas within their habitat.

Hiding

As prey species by nature, small animals such as rabbits, guinea pigs and chinchillas are wired to hide from predators. As a pet parent, it's important to support this instinct by providing safe "hideouts" for your pet. Great options for this include cardboard boxes with door holes or woven hay habitats such as our Timothy CLUB Bungalow. Depending on available space, you might even create a maze for your pet using materials such as cardboard boxes and tubes.

Digging

Some form of digging is a natural behavior for most small pets. Smaller pets will readily satisfy this urge with regular access to clean, soft bedding. To support this behavior in larger pets, create a digging box using a large, clear, rectangular plastic box. Cut an entry hole along the long side (just large enough for your pet to enter) and fill with a shallow layer of safe litter or bedding material (pelleted wheat straw litter or unprinted paper bedding work great). Your pet will enjoy this digging playground alone, or you can add some healthy treats in the litter to create a treasure hunt.

The Human/Animal Bond

Your relationship with your pet is special and unique, and it's important to remember that the human/animal bond takes time and experience to build. Using a few key exercises and tips, you can develop the depth of your relationship with your pet on a daily basis.

- Use clear verbal communication, repeating key words and phrases such as "love," "treat" and "pick up." Always be honest with your pet in order to build and maintain their trust.
- Engage in enriching games and activities that encourage natural behaviors such as burrowing, digging, and climbing. Play with your pet on his/her level so that he/she feels safe and directly engaged with you.
- Offer choices when it comes to enrichment accessories/activities and allow your pet to choose what he/she wants to engage in.
- Clicker training can be an extremely beneficial exercise with all small pet species. Use this type of training to teach and reinforce positive behaviors.



NUTRITIONAL ENRICHMENT

Hay Variety



Providing a variety of different types of hay is an easy and important way to add daily nutritional enrichment into your pet's routine. Eating a mix of hays allows pets to experience a multitude of tastes and textures, helping prevent picky eating down the road. For additional enrichment with hay, try Oxbow's Botanical Hay (with fragrant herbs mixed in) or Harvest Stacks compressed hays.

Fresh Greens



Fresh greens are a great source of daily nutritional enrichment. Greens provide important vitamins and minerals, in addition to helping keep your pet hydrated. As a general guideline, fresh greens should make up about 8% of a herbivore's diet. Consult with your veterinarian for a list of appropriate varieties. For rabbits, the House Rabbit Society offers a comprehensive list of appropriate greens at rabbit.org.

Treats



Treats are great for encouraging interaction between owner and pet, but they should only be offered in small amounts. Limit treats to no more than 2% of your pet's daily diet. For many pets (such as rabbits, guinea pigs, and chinchillas), fruits and veggies are not daily staples of the diet and should be considered treats. Avoid dried fruit, as it contains too much concentrated sugar. Opt for fresh or freeze-dried fruit instead.