Why pets need enrichment

By Jane Aten

Enrichment is a word one hears a lot in the dog behavior world. When dog people hear the word "enrichment," they often think of things like food puzzles and Kongs. By definition, enrichment is the action of improving or enhancing the quality or value of something.

I often think about the questions that come up when working with dogs. What does the dog in front of me find reinforcing? What do they find enriching? For my Boston terrier-cairn terrier, Rugby, the most enriching activity is sunbathing. My other dog, Cricket, finds Thursdays and Fridays highly enriching. Thursday is when I roll the trash bins out to the sidewalk. Friday is when I roll them back in. Cricket is a border collie-Belgian malinois-whippet mix. She's loved stalking since she was a puppy. Since Rugby — her main target — hates being stalked, I spent much of Cricket's first few months teaching her alternative behaviors to what her genetics told her was the best game ever.

One dark Thursday night in the winter, I rolled my garbage bins from the side yard to the curb. As I walked back around, something bolted out of the dark and charged straight for me. First, I screamed, then I laughed as I realized it was baby Cricket. She thought this sequence of events was amazing. She successfully stalked her first victim. When she caught her prey (me), it screeched. Then, it was followed by a laughing, presumably happy human. That's a seriously reinforcing sequence.

Now every time I walk to the side yard, Cricket finds a hiding spot. She waits for me to come back around, then she chases me. I've started playing my role in this game, the human sheep. Sometimes I pretend like I don't see her, then get startled when she pops out. Sometimes I'm a savvy sheep; if she pops up, I freeze. If she lays back down in a stalking position, I'll continue creeping around. Other times I'm a less-savvy sheep. If she pops up, I'll run until she "catches" me.

The principles that led to me becoming the human sheep are the same principles that guide the enrichment programs at Marin Humane. In addition to things like food puzzles in the dogs' kennels, we also have out-of-kennel enrichment activities like playgroups, scenting and hikes with volunteers. Our special "Enrichment Room" expands on that idea.

The Enrichment Room is all about autonomy, allowing dogs to do what they find most enriching. Our volunteers set up puzzle toys, stuffies, wobble boards, cozy beds, music, a bubble machine with bacon-flavored dog-safe bubbles and more. There's also a comfy loveseat where volunteers

can hang out with a dog. The room is scattered with treats to encourage each dog to investigate. Some dogs forage for all the treats, others explore the room, looking for what's new and exciting. Some dogs find the nearest human and solicit snuggles.

The Enrichment Room is perfect for under-socialized dogs. It's a relatively quiet space where a dog can spend time in the presence of humans who won't touch them if they don't want to be touched. Between feeders, walkers and enrichment volunteers, a shelter dog has six different people per day coming into their space. That's a lot of social pressure for a dog that interacted with maybe one human a few times before arriving at the shelter. We use the Enrichment Room as a bridge for those dogs.

With regular visits to the Enrichment Room, we see dogs that were once afraid to explore the room or eat in the presence of humans now confidently trotting in, visiting with the humans and searching for snacks.

Yes, enrichment looks like simple fun but it's much more. It truly enhances their quality of life.

Jane Aten is the shelter dog behavior coordinator at Marin Humane, which contributes Tails of Marin and welcomes questions and comments. Visit marinhumane.org, find us on social media @marinhumane or email lbloch@marinhumane.org.