

## ADVICE SHEET 16

### ENVIRONMENTAL ENRICHMENT FOR DOGS

Wild dogs spend a lot of time finding and eating food. They wander in search of prey, hunt and catch it or scavenge for the remains of other animals' successful hunts. In the domestic situation, dogs eat all of their food in just a few seconds which means that they are left with an enormous amount of excess time. This results in under-stimulation, boredom and problem behaviour, such as destructiveness. To avoid this we need to make dogs work for their food in ways that simulate the sorts of things they would normally do in the wild.

If we do not provide suitable ways for dogs to use up their time and energy, then we run the risk that they will find things to amuse themselves, many of which we will not like. This is especially true for younger dogs that are, by their nature, more active and more inclined to find things to do.

Chewing behaviour is particularly important to dogs. They use it to soothe themselves when they are anxious and to occupy themselves when they are bored. It is impossible to suppress this behaviour but we can redirect it in a way that reduces damage to our own property.

### SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES FOR DOGS

#### Activity feeding (food finding)

- Scatter part of the dog's food on the lawn for the dog to find (or in the park if there are no other dogs around)
- Use ready made activity feeders (Activity ball, Puzzle Ball<sup>®</sup>, Buster Cube<sup>®</sup>, Havaball<sup>®</sup>)
- Make home-made feeders from empty plastic bottles with the lid taken off (these can be suspended at dog height for the dog to knock food out of).
- Hide food in a number of locations around the garden (under pots, in buckets, etc.).
- Feed most of your dog's food through activity feeding in several short sessions each day.

#### Digging

Redirect this to a more suitable location, such as a country park.

Most dogs will mimic digging behaviour displayed by the owner: simply make an excited digging action on a patch of earth while saying 'dig, dig, dig'. The majority of dogs will learn to dig on command within a few minutes.

Submerge an empty bucket in the soil. Put a small dog chew in it and lightly sprinkle with earth. Show the dog so that it removes the chew. Repeat daily, each time increasing the depth of earth until the bucket is two-thirds full. You could also put a rock on the top or experiment with other ways of burying things.

#### Destructiveness

Some dogs (particularly young ones) need to have things to destroy. This desire to destroy things is part of growing up and declines as the dog matures. Likewise, anxious or unsettled dogs will show signs of increased destructiveness, which is also often temporary. Good targets for destructive behaviour include:

- empty cardboard boxes and cardboard tubes to tear up
- tightly-rolled-up newspapers to rip up (with food treats rolled inside).

#### Prey catching and handling behaviour

Play throw-fetch games to redirect chase behaviour.

Throw a ball, toy or Frisbee<sup>®</sup> back and forth between two people (let the dog get it occasionally and give a treat for success).

Provide toys for shaking and biting:

- squeaky
- with parts that flap when shaken.

Provide good safe targets for chewing:

- nylon bones
- edible chews as part of daily diet.