



Tompkins County SPCA

Dog Care Series

Kong is King

We humans tend to be over stimulated. We crave “down” time. Between the 9 to 5 of work, the day-planner that lacks enough room for all our errands, the telephone calls we need to return and the home projects we can never get to is our deep longing to get away from it all. Our fantasies are laced with tropical sunsets, long sandy beaches, and all day with nothing to do. Our dogs, unfortunately, have the opposite problem.

Within the psyche of every dog is a deep, genetic legacy that evolved to handle and crave the “career-family” juggling act--hunting and scavenging for food, dealing with the social complexities of life in a pack 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Even the meekest of dogs has a bit of the wolf left in him. In the era of suburbia, domesticity, safety, backyards, and solitude, dogs would trade places with us in a heartbeat. They long for the daily grind. They yearn for the hunt, the excitement, the novel sights, sounds, and most importantly, the smells of new things, every day, as often as possible.

Give them free reign, and you'd see them cruising down main street every night--eating, running around, urinating, growling. In short, having a helluva good time, dog-wise. Of course, in a world dominated by man-made dangers, free reign is a recipe for disaster. But modern life, on the opposite end of the spectrum, is often a recipe of boredom for dogs. And chronic boredom can undermine their health and their happiness.



Fortunately, there are easy answers to the question of how we can provide adequate stimulation for our canine companions. And best of all, putting them into practice can better their mental and physical health to boot. One way is to increase the amount of novel sights, sounds, and smells your dog is exposed to every day. Another is to bump up his quota of free dog interaction. Sign him up for some classes. It doesn't matter if he is gifted at these things, he could be the class dunce for all you should care.

The goal here is process, not product. The value lies in his getting out, having a good time, and solving some problems.

Although there is no substitute for good, consistent off-leash dog-dog interaction, for those of us with less time, the answer lies in something even more basic--and can be achieved with a simple toy and some peanut butter. As silly as it sounds, it works.

One of the great innovations of our time, dog-wise, is the Kong toy, which can be purchased at virtually any pet supply store. Into these robust red rubber hollow toys can go all manners of dog food and goodies--peanut butter, mashed potatoes, kibble, even tofu. To get to the goodies, your dog must struggle, chew, bite, tear, paw, shake and everything else she can think of to get to the gold. It's called "work-to-eat problem solving" and it can provide hours upon hours of true happy-dog-producing stimulation, depending on how much and how challenging you want to be.

But start off easy (a few dog cookies)--if you are too hard at first, he may give up. Increases in level of difficulty should be done in small increments, so that the dog succeeds while developing perseverance. And, over time, increasing the challenge can turn your couch-potato canine into the finely tuned athlete he yearns to be, the envy of the off-leash beach crowd.



For the beginner, loose and small easy-to-fall-out pieces work best. Then gradually up the challenge and--most importantly--the ante. Peanut butter or canned food on the outside, hiding coveted treats on the inside will give him side-polishing challenges until he gets to the center.

The realities of modern life often require that dogs spend some part of the day alone. Many of these dogs receive plenty of attention and stimulation and are happy and healthy dogs. But if work and life keeps you from giving your dog all you feel he needs and deserves and trips to the dog park are in hiatus because of either bad weather or big projects, don't feel guilty--put him to work!

By innovative Kong stuffing and making your dog work-to-eat, his health will improve, his mental acuity will improve. But best of all, he'll love you for it.