



## What is “environmental enrichment” and why is it important?

Environmental enrichment is a term used in animal welfare science which is defined as *changing a captive animal's environment in a way that improves the animal's quality of life.*

A few years ago, the term *environmental enrichment* was replaced by the phrase *meeting an animal's needs*, which better defines the issue.

Our dogs and cats are a part of our family. In general, pet caregivers try to provide an environment that offers their pet a happy and enjoyable life. To meet an animal's needs, we need to understand what is required to help the individual animal feel secure, and also how to provide appropriate stimulation for an individual, so that the pet can thrive.

Individual needs is a phrase that describes physical and mental stimulation, and also the animal's requirements for rest, food, water, social interaction, a general sense of security, the ability to engage in natural species-typical behaviours, and also the provision of a comfortable rest area where the animal feels safe. Most pets also gain comfort from their human caregiver, and pets need their human caregiver to be advocates for them.

### Stimulation

Behaviour problems can arise when an animal does not have adequate stimulation, and also when an animal gets too much stimulation. A pet caregiver must understand what is right for their specific individual, which can differ from generic advice.

### The need for a sense of security, a safe area and caregiver support

Chronic anxiety can occur if an animal's needs for security are not met. Chronic anxiety leads to decreased welfare, as well as physical health issues. In some cases, behaviour problems can develop, which lead to problems for the human caregivers, and may result in caregivers facing the difficult decision to consider relinquishing their pet.

## Species differences

Different species have a variety of natural behaviours, and when inhibited from engaging in them, their quality of life, and their mental and physical health can be compromised.

## Individual differences

Although many animals of a species may tend to like certain types of stimulation, every individual is different. Let your dog or cat tell you what they like. For example, some dogs become anxious around other dogs. They may avoid other dogs, or become aggressive when another dog greets them. These dogs are unlikely to enjoy going to the dog park. Instead, these dogs may prefer one-on-one play dates with specific dog friends. Some dogs prefer human company only, so they may prefer a walk where they do not meet another dog.

## Dog and cat training can be a form of “enrichment”

Teaching dogs and cats to offer useful behaviours is mentally and socially stimulating. Some behaviours we teach our animals can also provide physical stimulation.

Training should be enjoyable for the animal and the human caregiver. Positive reinforcement training (giving an animal something the animal likes for offering a behaviour) should be the only type of training used.

Some trainers also use punishment and negative reinforcement techniques. These techniques rely on the trainer or caregiver causing the animal some degree of discomfort, pain or fear, such as shaking a can of coins. In the very short term, the training seems to work. However, an animal's anxiety can increase, compromising the animal's welfare. In the long term, behaviour problems can develop that are much more difficult for the caregiver, such as aggression and other behaviours that occur due to increased anxiety.

The animal training industry in Australia is not regulated. Any person can call themselves a dog trainer. For more information and to find a trainer that has a training certification and uses scientifically recognised training practices, visit:

1. <https://www.ppgaaustralia.net.au/Member-Search>
2. <https://www.deltainstitute.edu.au/find-a-trainer>
3. <https://www.ava.com.au/policy-advocacy/policies/companion-animals-dog-behaviour/the-use-of-punishment-and-negative-reinforcement-in-dog-training/>