

Dogs like to hunt, work for their meals

Dr. Marty Becker / Knight Ridder (Feb 2006)

Way back before they embarked on their life of leisure in our homes, canids (dog family) got their food the old-fashioned way – they earned it. Swift, strong and rugged, these canine ancestors spent many hours each day pursuing prey in a never-ending quest to fill their rumbling bellies.

When they teamed with early humans, our four-legged friends developed special talents to help us. Ancestors of greyhounds and whippets detected prey with their sharp eyes then it was off to the races, no mechanical rabbit necessary.

Evolving scent hounds smelled the footprints with the stamina to follow them for hours. Terriers cleared our farms and granaries of vermin.

Getting food took skill and cunning, using the brain as much as physical attributes.

Fast forward to the 21st century and now these highly evolved specialists have checked their tools at the kitchen door, as they simply show up and a meal is plopped into a bowl and shoved under their snouts. Because the meal is typically consumed so quickly – wolfed down – it can easily become the canine version of fast food; something that puts it squarely in conflict with an intense hunting history.

"Like modern humans, dogs lead lives of luxury today when compared to the 'struggle for survival' in the past," said Dr. Steve Tsengas, president and founder of OurPet's Co., and a leading proponent to make meal times more challenging for pets through the use of interactive feeding products.

"The life of plenty is a good thing, but it tends to make both pets and people overweight and underutilized," said Dr. Tsengas.

This underutilization also leaves them feeling bored, and more prone to develop psychological problems. "Boredom often leads to dumb, fat, frustrated pets," says Dr. Rolan Tripp, the founder of www.AnimalBehavior.Net, a Web-based service that helps people with their pet's behavior problems.

Dogs weren't bored when they had to work for food. Famed animal behaviorist and animal training publisher Ian Dunbar says that by not allowing pets to pursue and earn food, we steal their life. When we steal their life, they become like a really rich person who doesn't have to work and is unhappy just being served. "Without a doubt, regularly feeding a new puppy (or adult dog) from a bowl is the single most disastrous mistake in dog husbandry and training. Within seconds of gulping, the poor dog now faces a mental void for the rest of the day with nothing but long, lonely hours to worry and fret, or work itself into a frenzy," says Dunbar. (See www.jamesandkenneth.com for more information.)



Canine genius food puzzles challenge and amuse dogs. (Photo courtesy of Canine Genius)

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So how does a dog owner put some challenge back into their dog's eating?

The answer: Replace the dog's food bowl with a variety of food puzzles and hide them around the house.

The Becker family was guilty of using dog bowls on both our golden retriever, Shakira, and papillon/poodle/Yorkie cross, Quixote, until late in 2005. But then we were sent a food-release toy called Canine Genius (www.caninegenius.com), filled them up with our dogs' regular amount of Science Diet kibble, and watched in amazement as it took Shakira 20 minutes to eat rather than 20 seconds, and Quixote took 25 minutes to push, paw, roll, grab-and-drop the bowling pin shaped toy to get kibble to drop out of the spout or crosscut openings.

My wife Teresa gave a Canine Genius to her friend, Betsy Schmeckpeper, who owns our dog's half brother, Griffie, a 1 1/2-year-old, papillon/toy poodle cross. Schmeckpeper says that since she started using the product, Griffie refuses to eat out of a bowl, preferring to take the Canine Genius and shake it, spin it and flip it end over end. Rather than wolfing down his meal, he grazes throughout the day.

Watching a dog work "soooo hard to eat" makes some people comment, "They seem frustrated about getting food out of that puzzle. Isn't that cruel?"

Behaviorists call this food motivated exercise, "constructive discontent." It's the same way my teenage son is motivated by a difficult video game. Tripp says, "We can treat boredom using constructive discontent (hunger) to expend energy, and stimulate intelligent problem solving, resulting in pets that are physically healthy, smarter, and more emotionally fulfilled."

Food puzzles vary in the difficulty of getting the food out, and some are adjustable and need to be customized to the dog's weight and personality. For starters, Tripp recommends starting with easy food puzzles for dogs that are thinner (greyhound) or easily frustrated or just learning the new concept. For overweight or clever dogs use harder food-puzzles like linked Canine Genius or the Buster Cube. You can also hide a pet's food around the house by sneaking a puzzle under a bed, or behind a sofa.

If you feed canned food, Tripp says you can divide it inside several puzzles and freeze them. He also recommends putting the frozen food puzzle inside of a large bowl, which makes it more difficult to get the food and keeps the room cleaner.

Giving food in puzzles when you leave in the morning for work gives your pooch a way to fill the long, lonely hours and can help prevent destruction of things in your home from boredom.

Having a job to do, a challenge, a problem to solve that is within your abilities to do is what keeps us alive, aware and engaged in our lives and the same is true for our canine companions.