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Enrichment Helps Develop Healthy, Good-Natured Pups

Enrichment Affects Growing Puppies Where It Matters Most: The Brain.

When it comes to breeding good-natured dogs with good physical fitness and high stress resilience, genetics aren't everything. In fact, many researchers have concluded only about one-third of the desirable characteristics of a pet are inherited from its parents; the remaining two-thirds depend on outside factors and influences—such as training, socialization, and stimulating surroundings—bestowed upon the animal at a young age. This means being raised in an environment high in enrichment. As tends to be the case with people, enrichment in youth leads to heightened cognitive function; with it, most puppies mature into pleasant, quick-to-learn animals any pet owner would be happy to call their own.

Enrichment affects growing puppies

where it matters most: the brain. And because the brain, like the body, goes through its most important developmental stages while the animal is young, it's preferable to breed dogs in an enriched environment from 3-12 weeks of age. Frequent handling enhances the cerebral cortex (the part of the brain which stimulates thinking); stimulating environments improve the rate of brain cell survival; problem-solving games assist in cognitive development.

Puppies which grow up in non-enriched environments tend to exhibit qualities undesired by breeders and pet owners alike. Researchers and authors John Paul Scott and John L. Fuller have noted non-enriched pups tend to be shy and reclusive, preferring to remain in their kennels instead of socializing and interacting. Most clients

desire a pet who will become their new best friend; this will not do if the animal's preference is to remain cooped up alone. Scott and Fuller further note enriched littermates, if given the choice, display active, fun-loving behavior. Furthermore, enriched puppies learn and remember better (meaning they tend to be obedient and memorize commands quicker than other dogs) and are more resilient to stress while their non-enriched counterparts usually struggle in these areas.

When enhancing enrichment, it's important to include physical activities; regular walking sessions; playtime; interaction between staff and the animals; and let's not forget games! Even something as simple as drilling a hole in a PCV pipe and placing a treat inside—encouraging the puppy to use their brain and strive for a reward!—will help.

Something to remember about handling, environments, and games: just one, in and of itself, is not a guarantee of a well-bred, enriched pup. Lots of exercise, for example, does not develop the synaptogenesis—learning and memory. Toys which encourage problem-solving are an important factor and a good start, but will not do by themselves. The combination is more important than the individual parts.

By the way, the more your staff understands these factors, the easier it will be for them to assist raising animals into potential pets. Not to mention: good human relationships are also part of what makes an ideal pet. Clients want dogs comfortable around people.

For breeders seeking to improve enrichment: training staff and volunteers so they understand the virtues of this process and what needs to be done is important. Regular outdoor activities, obedience and agility classes, and more elaborate toys will build up the dogs' developing minds and help them develop into the fun-loving, good-natured pets your clients will fall in love with.

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