

Scientific Evidence Supporting The Coerenza Approach

Research foundations for whole-dog care across five interconnected pillars

The Coerenza Approach is grounded in established veterinary science, not theory. Integrated frameworks that address exercise, enrichment, environment, nutrition, and the dog's role within the family have long informed progressive practice in Europe and Australia. A growing body of research demonstrates that attending to these interconnected pillars improves clinical outcomes, behavior, and overall welfare. The key studies and clinical references supporting this model are summarized below.

1. Exercise: Physical Activity Tailored to the Individual Dog

Exercise is not a generic prescription. It must match age, breed, health status, and energy levels to prevent obesity (affecting approximately 35% of dogs), support cardiovascular and musculoskeletal health, reduce excess energy that fuels behavioral issues, and preserve lean mass during weight management.

Key Evidence

- Veterinary-prescribed physical activity programs significantly increase walking and overall activity in both dogs and owners, improving adherence and outcomes.
- Joint owner–dog outdoor exercise programs increase vigorous activity and reduce sedentary time in owners while benefiting dogs.
- Adding structured exercise to caloric restriction in weight-loss programs better preserves lean body mass and improves metabolic markers compared with diet alone.
- Purdue University Canine Welfare Science resources and multiple reviews confirm that exercise supports heart and lung function, prevents obesity, and improves overall well-being and behavior.

Implications for practice: Baseline assessments of mobility, body condition, and behavior guide individualized plans—morning jogs, fetch, backyard obstacle courses, or controlled rehabilitation exercises. This pillar directly addresses excess energy and prevents the frustration owners experience when walks become optional.

2. Environment: Creating Safety, Comfort, and Accessibility

A dog's physical surroundings profoundly influence stress, mobility, vigilance, and emotional security. Slippery floors, isolation, poor acoustics, or lack of safe spaces can manifest as hesitation, pacing, or anxiety—issues often misread as purely behavioral problems.

Key Evidence

- Environmental modifications (non-slip runners, elevated beds, quiet zones, window perches, safe chews) reduce cautious movement and promote confident resting and exploration.
- Environmental enrichment studies in homes, shelters, laboratories, and training settings show reduced stress and alert behaviors, increased relaxation, and fewer stereotypic or abnormal actions when dogs have appropriate physical spaces and sensory opportunities.
- Shelter and kennel enrichment programs (toys, structures, sensory items) improve desirable behaviors and adoption outcomes while lowering stress hormones and undesirable vocalization.

Implications for practice: The Coerenza lens encourages owners to view the home through the dog's eyes. Simple, low-cost changes—runners, crate relocation, safe chewing outlets—often produce rapid improvements in posture and confidence that complement veterinary care.

3. Enrichment: Feeding the Curious Mind

Mental stimulation prevents boredom-driven behaviors (chewing, barking, shadow-stalking) and supports cognitive health, emotional regulation, and resilience. Enrichment is not an optional extra; it is essential for dogs' natural foraging, problem-solving, and social instincts.

Key Evidence (strongest pillar in recent literature)

- A well-designed pilot study of seven environmental enrichment activities in assistance dogs produced statistically significant increases in relaxation behaviors ($p < 0.01$) and reductions in alert ($p < 0.01$) and stress behaviors ($p = 0.02$). Conspecific play and playhouse structures were most effective; food-based toys alone were least impactful.
- Multiple reviews and trials in shelters, laboratories, and homes confirm that enrichment reduces stereotypic and abnormal behaviors, barking, anxiety, and stress while improving cognitive function, exploration, and relaxation. Olfactory, social, cognitive, and novel sensory enrichment (rotated to prevent habituation) are particularly powerful.
- Benefits appear across contexts: kennelled dogs, post-operative patients, and home pets.

Implications for practice: Treasure hunts, puzzle games, and scent-focused walks are textbook enrichment. The Coerenza Approach elevates these from casual activities to deliberate welfare interventions. Rotating activity types (social + structural + cognitive) yields the best results.

4. Nutrition: Fueling Vitality with Evidence-Based, Individualized Diets

Nutrition is foundational yet frequently confusing due to marketing and trends. Proper feeding prevents imbalances, supports coat, digestion, and energy, maintains healthy weight, and directly influences longevity and chronic disease risk.

Key Evidence

- The landmark 14-year Purina lifespan study in Labrador Retrievers (48 dogs) demonstrated that maintaining lean body condition from puppyhood (25% caloric restriction versus control feeding) extended median lifespan by 1.8 years (approximately 15% longer; mean 13 versus 11.2 years). Lean-fed dogs had dramatically lower and less severe osteoarthritis (50% versus 83% hip OA), better joint health overall, maintained immune responses, and improved insulin sensitivity—with no adverse effects on growth or metabolism.
- Obesity shortens life expectancy by approximately two years and increases disease risk; tailored nutrition combined with exercise is superior for sustainable weight management and lean-mass preservation.
- Reviews emphasize individualized, evidence-based diets (adjusted for age, breed, activity, and health status) over trends. Nutritional imbalances affect an estimated 15% of dogs when guidance is lacking.

Implications for practice: Transition to high-quality, portion-controlled feeding with training meals aligns with this pillar. Collaboration between veterinarian and owner for baseline assessment and ongoing monitoring is essential—nutrition is the domain where clinical expertise and daily implementation most clearly intersect.

5. Responsibility: The Dog's Role Within the Family

Dogs are not passive houseguests. They thrive when given predictable routines, clear expectations, gentle “jobs,” and meaningful inclusion in family life. This pillar addresses emotional needs, reduces anxiety arising from unclear social roles or isolation, and strengthens the reciprocal human–animal bond.

Key Evidence

- Scoping reviews of human–dog bond literature show that owner characteristics, attachment styles, and the degree of integration and role provision significantly influence dog welfare. Positive bonds and inclusion correlate with better outcomes; unclear expectations or social isolation increase risk of anxiety and behavioral issues.
- Strong human–animal bonds provide social support and structure that buffer stress for dogs. Dogs viewed and treated as family members with active roles show improved emotional stability and reduced problem behaviors.
- Studies on attachment and daily interaction demonstrate reciprocity: purposeful inclusion (calm greetings, polite waiting, small tasks, family activities) enhances the dog's sense of security and partnership, mirroring benefits observed in working and assistance dogs.

Implications for practice: Creating routines, small jobs, and partnership reframes “training” as relationship-building and role clarification. This reduces the common owner frustration that the dog “doesn’t understand what is expected.”

Bringing the Pillars Together: Synergy and Clinical Translation

These pillars do not operate in isolation. Exercise without enrichment can leave mental needs unmet; excellent nutrition without environmental safety yields limited mobility gains; a strong bond without clear roles can still produce anxiety. The literature consistently shows that integrated, multimodal approaches outperform single-pillar interventions—precisely the philosophy of The Coerenza Approach.

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This summary is intended for veterinary professionals and educational use. Full citations and DOIs are available in the linked primary literature.