

Suggestions for environmental enrichment for cats

An enriched environment for a cat offers a wealth of resources spread throughout the home that offer outlets for species-typical behaviors. Resources can include watering and feeding sites, elimination sites, scratching sites, resting/perching sites, toys and play activities.

Sensory enrichment

These might include a radio, television, a DVD of animals, toys that squeak or are enhanced with catnip if the cat is responsive, as well as foraging devices. When choosing DVDs for cats, ensure that the subjects are prey or socially amicable cats to avoid potential redirected aggression.

Feeding

Toys are available that can be filled with canned food and cheese for the pet to empty. Freezing the food in the toys will increase the time the pet spends with it. Other toys are designed to be moved around so that dry food or treats will fall from openings in the toys, such as the pipolino, FunKitty, or Kitty Kong toys (Figure 4.10).

Food can be delivered in a variety of creative ways to simulate hunting behavior. Small stashes of food can be hidden around the home to provide a food scavenger hunt for the pet. The family can have food-tossing sessions during which a piece of kibble or treat is tossed down the hall, up the stairs, or into a kennel for the cat to chase. Treats or kibble can be placed in plastic water bottles, cardboard milk containers, or soda bottles from which the pet can rattle out treats. A food dispenser that uses a timer to dispense food at intervals can be used to stimulate the cat throughout the day. Kitty drinking fountains can provide an interesting addition to the environment for some cats.

Manipulative toys and objects

Most young cats seem to enjoy stuffed toys that can be attacked. Adding catnip to the toy may increase the cat's interest. Some cats may be particularly interested in toys that must be rolled about or moved to release catnip. Ping pong balls, walnuts, and other toys can be provided for the cat to pounce on. A few small holes can be cut in a plastic water bottle containing some treats. The cat will roll it around to get the treats to fall through the holes. Feather or rubber toys on flexible wires that twist about are other good choices. Some cats find certain bird and dog toys appealing. Raw hide strips and other dog food chews can be used to keep cats busy. Rotating the availability of toys may increase their novelty and interest.

Play

Toys and games should address the cat's innate behaviors. Cat toys that dangle from a door handle or scratching post and those mounted on springs can provide good outlets for play. Toys suspended from strings and animated by a fan and battery-operated toys will entertain most cats. Mobile-like toys that sway and bounce when swatted are good choices for some cats (Figure 4.8). String and thread should be kept away from cats between play sessions, and all toys should be large and sturdy enough that they cannot be broken or ingested. Interactive play, however, can be the best outlet for most cats' needs. Hands, fingers, and toes should never be used to encourage play.

Environmental

The cat's environment should be set to satisfy each cat's specific needs. Multilevel resting areas can be particularly important in multicat households. "Cat shelves" can be mounted on walls that allow cats to explore multiple levels in the home, and perches can be set up at windowsills, on bookcase shelves and appliances. Kitty condos also provide resting, play, and exploration areas. Sunny locations are good choices for perching areas. Bird and squirrel feeders can be set up for the cat to watch, provided it does not increase arousal or frustration. Cardboard boxes and paper bags can be placed around the home to encourage exploratory behavior. Catnip caches can be hidden around the home for the cat to seek out and enjoy. Some cats will be entertained by videos of wildlife or fish in an aquarium. For cats that enjoy chewing on fresh greens, gardens of sprouted wheatgrass or catnip can be provided. Objects for the cat to scratch should be provided, including rope, carpet, and sisal-covered posts, fireplace logs, and commercial cardboard scratching pads. Some cats may like vertical areas to scratch, while others may prefer horizontal objects. While it is safer to keep the pet indoors, some cats can be confined to the yard using special types of cat fencing.

Social

Provide another pet – same or another species – for social interaction. People interactions are also important.

Training

Using food lure reward training, most cats can be trained to sit and come on cue as well as a wide variety of tricks.