

ENVIRONMENTAL ENRICHMENT FOR CATS



WHAT IS ENVIRONMENTAL ENRICHMENT?

This includes physical surroundings and social interactions with humans and other pets. Cats can be very difficult for owners to read signs of illness, pain, or stress. You can be proactive to meeting appropriate environmental needs, which can help prevent unwanted behaviors and help to catch medical issues at early onset.

WHAT TYPES OF THINGS CAUSE STRESS IN CATS?

Cats can be stressed by significant changes in the environment. Examples of this can be moving to a new home, adding a family member (human or another pet), or threatening smells. Since cats have a heightened sense of smell, they may react to something that you don't notice. Forcing interactions with a cat that is not interested is another cause of stress in cats. Many cats like human interaction such as petting, grooming, or being played with. Individual preferences can determine how much or how little of these types of interactions are desired.

WHAT CAN I DO AT HOME?

Each cat in the house should have a safe place that they can be 3, 6, or 9 feet away from other cats in the household. Some cats are comfortable being with specific cats at each of these space ranges. Note the preferences of your cats and adjust accordingly. Many cats like elevated areas that have sides and are big enough to comfortably fit only themselves. You should have significantly more spaces than you have cats. Consider putting up a hammock or shelving to utilize vertical space. If there are dogs in the house, consider making a dog-free zone with baby gates or half doors.

Increase your cat's hunting and feeding opportunities. You can place food in small bowls or scatter treats around the house to stimulate your cat's interest. This will be more fun for your cat than eating food out of a bowl. Make sure that there are enough resources in multiple places for the number of cats. If there are 3 cats, then there should be at least four separate locations for litter boxes, sleeping spots, and water bowls (two next to each other do not count). You can also use food toys/puzzles to feed your cat a portion of the daily ration of dry food.

Try to schedule play time with each cat for at least a few minutes per day. Don't play with your cats with your hands and feet, but use wand toys or electronic toys to engage them. Engaging in play with hands and feet can encourage them to bite or scratch hands and feet when they are adults. Always give your cat food at the end of the play session as this mimics the feral cat's stalking, chasing, and eating prey. If you want the toys to retain their novelty, the toys used for play sessions should be put away when you are not using them. To increase the enrichment of the toys that your cat has available, try to rotate the toys at least every few weeks. You can pick up all of the current toys that are out and put them away for a few weeks. Another set of toys can be available to your cat for a few weeks, then switch.



Allowing your cat to have some safe time outdoors is another excellent way to enrich your cat. You can train your cat to walk on a leash and harness or construct an outdoor enclosure to keep your cat safe. You can also bring the outdoors inside with some cat-safe grasses or plants.

Rawhides, bully sticks, dried fish, or beef jerky are also good items to see if your cat enjoys them. You may need to soften them in water for a few minutes to get your cat interested. Monitor your cat to make sure that he doesn't chew off and swallow larger chunks as this may be dangerous.

Scratching posts should be placed in prominent areas of the house, preferably near their bedding spots. Experiment with a variety of textures and types to see which your cats prefer. Scratchers can be vertical or horizontal. Cats enjoy climbing, perching, and enjoying playing or lunging on cat trees. All sizes of cat trees are available on Amazon or at your local pet supply store. Some cats are just as happy playing in a cardboard box or in a paper bag. Do some experimenting and find out what works for you and your cat.

Training your cat for tricks or husbandry behaviors is an excellent way of teaching appropriate interaction with humans as well as being good enrichment. There are even titles you can earn with your cat!