

**Environmental Enrichment for Indoor Cats: Maximizing Your Home to
Better Meet Your Cat's Needs**
Ingrid Johnson, CCBC (Certified Cat Behavior Consultant)

"Environmental enrichment is a concept which describes how the environments of captive animals can be changed for the benefit of the inhabitants. It is a dynamic process in which changes to structures and husbandry practices are made with the goal of increasing behavioral choices to animals and drawing out their species appropriate behaviors and abilities, thus enhancing animal welfare." (Young 2003)

Enrichment is more than just providing toys. Our homes are essentially glorified cages. We must strive to make our homes - our cats' "cages" - the most fun and stimulating places they can be by maximizing all of our cats' needs while keeping them safe.

Humans have created a world that is no longer safe for cats. We can choose to let our beloved cats go outside, where they can be hit by cars, attacked by dogs or wild animals, shot with pellet guns, and live a life threatened by diseases and parasites, or we can keep them safely indoors. But that safety comes with a price, doesn't it? We force cats to comply with the expectations of the human world, and that often sets them up to fail.

In order to meet our cats' needs, we need a better understanding of what exactly those needs are. Cats thrive on predictability and routine. They like to feel in control of their surroundings and resources such as food, water, litter, vertical space, and safe napping spots. Their species is both predator and prey, so the needs of both must be met. That means providing places to retreat that create a sense of safety and security while simultaneously appealing to their hunting instincts and prey drive.

This is where play and positive frustration come in. "Positive frustration" refers to situations in which the animals have to figure out a problem and are rewarded when they do so. An example would be the process of hunting - figuring out how to catch prey so that they can eat. In the home setting, we use foraging toys, also referred to as food puzzles, to mimic this predatory drive and create positive frustration. Of course, play time with both interactive and solo object toys as well as interaction with other cats, dogs, and humans can also be enriching and desirable to different extents, depending on the individual.

Food and Water

Cats are not family-style eaters, yet humans seem to insist on lining up all of our cats' bowls in the kitchen and forcing them all to eat together. This is not an ideal way to feed your cats. In fact, it is a great way to create unnecessary competition, increase aggression between cats, and cause someone to go without their portion of canned food. Meal feeding and family-style eating creates competition that often results in enthusiastic overeating, which can lead to vomiting. Cats naturally eat nine to 16 small, evenly sized meals throughout the course of the day. They are grazers. Rather than creating so much competition at meal time, I recommend creating feeding stations that allow them to graze on canned food the way they have previously grazed on dry kibble. This allows the cats to eat in the locations and at the times that they feel most comfortable.



Try to maintain a consistent schedule of feeding and play, as cats are extreme creatures of habit who thrive on routine. It is especially important to maintain schedules in the face of environmental stressors such as houseguests, moving, bringing home a new baby, etc.

Another tip is to separate food and water. In the wild, cats would not normally have a water source right next to where they killed their prey, so it is more natural for them to have food that is separate from their water. (Both should be separated from their litter.) Cats can be very finicky about the taste of their water. Putting food and water bowls close together often results in food particle contamination, which distorts the taste of the water, resulting in less drinking. If you have a dog, always offer a separate water source for your cat. While they may choose to drink from the dog's bowl, they may also want to avoid doggy slobber. Be sure to offer options.

While we are on the subject of water, let's have some fun! Some cats really do enjoy playing with water - on their terms, of course. Try placing some marbles on the bottom of a bathroom sink filled with water so your cat can "go fishing" for them. This game can be a lot of fun because the marbles are quite slippery and actually getting one out of the sink is quite a challenge. I place a towel on the edge of the sink to help absorb any mess from this game. If your cats are leery of actually sticking their paws into the water, try ping-pong balls. They float on top and bounce around a bit. You can also try children's bathtub windup toys; the only downside is that you often have to stick around to keep winding them up.

Another fun option is making flavored ice cubes. Tuna water or low-/no-sodium chicken broth can be great for this. I usually put a little piece of meat in the center so it is like a Tootsie Pop, and they get a treat when it melts! These ice cubes can be placed in sinks, bathtubs, sheet pans, or even dropped into water bowls to flavor the water. However, if you are going to do this, you must provide a regular unflavored water source as well.

Offering dry food in food-dispensing toys, called foraging toys or food puzzles, is a great way to allow your cats to free feed and eat their normal nine to 16 small meals per day while also giving them something fun to do with their time. Foraging toys provide an outlet for cats' hunting instincts and prey drive. They offer positive frustration; when they figure out the puzzle, they are rewarded with food. This style of free feeding also solves the problem of excessive overeating that often results in the vomiting of undigested food. I have seen foraging reduce aggression in multiple cat homes, because the cats have to spend more time figuring out how they are going to acquire food and eat, so they have less time to beat up their housemates. More mental stimulation leads to less environmental stress!

For cats new to foraging, toys should be clear and round with multiple holes. Clear objects allow them to see the kibble, round means the toys will roll easily, and objects with multiple holes will dispense the kibble easily so your cat can be successful and learn the game. As they start to get the hang of manipulating the toys, try offering opaque objects so that the food inside can no longer be seen. Next, try toys with erratic movement or those that do not roll very easily. The ultimate goal is to find your cat's greatest level of challenge. This will, of course, be different for each individual. I have found opaque, cube-shaped toys and weighted toys to be the most difficult. Some cats I refer to as "master foragers" eventually end up hitting a wall, and short of

will fulfill that need in less desirable places such as the top of the kitchen cabinets or refrigerator, the top of your closet on your clean clothes, or on a piece of furniture you would prefer that they not climb.

While we are on the subject of vertical space, let's talk about scratching behavior. Cats scratch for four main reasons: to scent mark, to groom their nails, to stretch, and to blow off stress and frustration. Set your cats up for success. Cats do not feel the need to scratch mark in an empty guest bedroom where no one ever goes or in the basement where you spend zero time. Get an attractive post and put it in a prominent, high-traffic area.

Scratching posts should be tall - a minimum of 32 inches - so cats can achieve a full-body stretch. They should also be sturdy and stable. Cats do not want scratching posts to move, so don't waste your money on the kind that hang from the doorknob. The posts should never topple over while cats are using them. The majority of cats prefer to scratch sisal, but any abrasive texture can work. Do not offer fuzzy, tufted carpet on your post as it teaches your cat to scratch that texture, which could lead to them scratching your carpets or rugs. Most people do not have sisal rugs in their homes, so cats do not make the same connection. Fuzzy, tufted carpet also does not do the job that cats need it to do: remove the sheath of their nails. They need a more abrasive surface to scratch.

Fun and Play

Indoor cats should still be allowed to enjoy the scents and textures of the outdoors in a safe, controlled manner. Try growing cat grass or catnip. Cats naturally chew on greens, and if you provide them regularly, your cats will not experience the vomiting that often occurs when greens are first offered.

Allow cats to experience the seasons! In the Fall, fill a cardboard box or old litter pan with leaves and sticks. Throw some kibble in among the leaves for added fun! You can leave a large branch with foliage on your screen porch. Your cats can play on and around it, scratch it, or chew it. Try hiding food around it for increased exploration. Be sure that you maintain proper flea and intestinal parasite control if you are going to do this.

Screen porches are an absolutely amazing way to help your cats feel as if they are going outside. Even a small screen porch can satisfy your cat and offer a warm sunbeam. They are also great places to build vertical space. Place birdbaths and birdfeeders near the porch to create kitty cat television. Don't have a screen porch? Open all of your doors and windows as often as you can. This helps air out the home, keeps it smelling fresh, and allows your cats to enjoy the sounds and smells of the outdoors, even without a porch.

Cat strollers are another awesome outlet for safe outdoor exploration. Begin by allowing your cat to explore the stroller while it's inside and not moving. Then take your cat for a brief stroll up and down the driveway, or simply sit outside with your cat in the stroller to enjoy the view. Gradually, over time, you can increase the distance of your walks. Many strollers will accommodate two cats, and it is, of course, always cool to bring the dog along too! Starting this process with young kittens and cats who are not fearful of travel is certainly easier. Strollers are also a great way to give a little enrichment to handicapped cats (three-legged or paralyzed cats,



combining toys, there comes a point where they can get food out of just about anything.

Litter Boxes

The placement and maintenance of litter boxes is another enormous factor in achieving feline contentment. Oftentimes, we provide litter boxes that are hard to access, not clean enough, or filled with stinky stuff then wonder why our cats are not compliant. Litter boxes should be big - one and a half times the length of a cat's body is ideal. They should have lots of room so that the cat can move and turn around without stepping on a soiled area. Litter boxes should be uncovered. If the client is using storage bin-style boxes or insists on having hooded boxes, be sure that they are clear so that the cats can anticipate if someone is coming. Remember that cats are both predator and prey, and using the litter box is one of their most vulnerable moments. They must feel safe or they will find another place to go.

Putting litter boxes behind cat doors or in dead-end areas is a recipe for disaster. All one cat has to do is guard the door and whack the other cat in the head as they come to use the box. It will not be long before the ambushed cat finds a new place to go to the bathroom. Cats want to eliminate in places where their human's scent is strong, but we always want to hide boxes in places we never go; these two preferences do not mix. Having unobtrusive boxes that are meticulously maintained is, by far, the preferred option. Cats do not want litter box rooms or cat rooms. They would prefer that the boxes be interspersed throughout the home. Bedrooms, bathrooms, home offices, and screen porches are all great places for litter boxes and are a lot more pleasant and less scary than basements, laundry rooms, and closets.

Also, from a cat's perspective, having multiple boxes all lined up in a row is the same as having only one big box. Offer one more litter box location than the number of cats so that all boxes cannot possibly be guarded or in use at any given time. Be sure to scoop daily - no exceptions! Dump and scrub the boxes every few weeks and replace them entirely every two years.

Vertical Space and Scratching

Vertical space and outlets for normal scratching behavior are very important aspects of feline environmental enrichment. Cats are the most three-dimensionally oriented of all of the species we share our homes with. It is absurd to think one can have a cat and not facilitate its innate need to climb. Cats take great comfort in being up high. Height allows them to survey a lot of area from a single vantage point and provides a sense of safety and security.

There is not usually one dominant cat in the feline world; it changes based on who owns a given space. The dominant cat changes from room to room, floor to floor, and piece of furniture to piece of furniture. Offering vertical space increases the square footage of your home. It gives the cats a chance to get up and away from other cats and find a solo resting spot. If you have multiple cats, dogs, or toddlers, vertical spaces can provide great spots for food bowls. I recommend placing cat condos near windows or sliding glass doors to facilitate bird and squirrel watching.

Climbing is also great exercise. Just as foraging toys are as close to letting a mouse loose in the house as we will get, indoor climbing opportunities are as close to providing trees as we can get. Cats need to scratch and scent mark too, and vertical spaces provide outlets for those innate behaviors as well. If cats aren't given appropriate outlets to satisfy their need for heights, they

for example).

I do not encourage leash and harness walks because they tend to encourage cats to bolt for the door. If you are going to take your cat on leashed walks, it's best to take them outside in their cat carrier or take them out through a door that they can't normally access to minimize door darting.

Interactive play is an imperative form of environmental enrichment. Play can strengthen the human/cat relationship and build bonds. It is also an enormous outlet for pent-up energy, an opportunity for exercise, and the ultimate way to let your little carnivore hunt! A cat's greatest thrill in life is the eye-stalk-chase-pounce-kill sequence, and that is only achieved through hunting. Interactive play and foraging toys are the best hunting outlets you can provide. Cats can be very prey-specific so you will need to find the prey that motivates your cat. Keep at it and try a variety of different toys. Do not leave the toys out unattended when not in use, as that lessens the novelty and motivation to play with them. A toy that is out of sight and out of mind creates much more interest when it appears.

A word about laser pointers: They never give your cat anything tangible to kill, and this can leave them feeling very frustrated and unsatisfied. Many people taunt with these toys, which is not very nice. Always follow a laser pointer game with a physical toy, tossed treat, or meal so there is some reward.

Many people say that their cats don't play, but often, they only believe that because they simply do not know how to play with their cats. Don't, for example, whack your cat in the head with a feather toy. Birds do not fly at cats' faces! It is also important to let your cat catch the toy once in a while or the game will become very unsatisfying. Yes, play is exercise and the idea is to get them to run, jump, and chase, but they have to be successful some of the time. Cats are built for speed and stealth, not endurance (they are not Labradors, after all), so a five- to 10-minute play session is plenty, but do so daily - ideally multiple times a day.

Don't forget about old standbys such as cardboard boxes and paper bags. Cats love these fun items and they are generally free. There are so many fun things you can do with a box! Offer it as is, stuff it with packing or tissue paper, close it and cut holes in it, put food inside and turn it into a foraging toy, or make it into a bed. Cardboard actually helps a cat with their "thermal neutral zone"; it is insulating and helps cats maintain their body temperature without expelling any energy. Be sure to rotate and replace these items regularly. Remove them for a week then offer a new one.

Household items can make amazing cat toys as well. Crinkled-up balls of paper, aluminum foil balls, pen caps, milk jug rings - the list of things that entertain cats for free is a long one. Paper towel and toilet paper rolls are great fun too. You can do so much with them! Offer them on their own, run a string through one and tie it to a door, or fold the ends in to make a homemade foraging toy or catnip dispenser.

Cat tunnels are also very entertaining. You can use the commercially available varieties or make them out of concrete form tubes from The Home Depot or Lowe's (cut holes along the sides to make them more interesting). My cats seem to prefer the children's tunnels from IKEA though.



Clicker training is not only a lot of fun, it can also build a much stronger relationship and level of understanding between you and your cats. Perhaps you want to teach practical behaviors for a purpose such as introducing cats who do not care for each other's company or maybe you want to use clicker training purely as an enrichment tool, for the fun and exercise. Clicker training is an awesome way to build foundation behaviors for feline agility, and teaching commands such as "come" or "kennel up" can even be lifesaving.

Lastly, a few tips designed especially for seniors: Make it easy for your seniors to easily access sunbeams and heat in general. Offer heating pads, snuggle safe discs, fuzzy beds near fireplaces, and other cozy options. One of the kidneys' main functions is to help regulate body temperature, and because many senior cats have some degree of arthritis and/or kidney disease, they are often heat seekers. Provide lots of warm, plush bedding for all of your cats, but especially for older ones. Give them room service! Older cats will often miss meals and subsequently lose weight because they choose warmth and comfort over making the trek to the food bowl. Bring resources closer for seniors so they have easier access to all of their basic needs.

Conclusions

In the end, if boredom, frustration, and stress are the leading causes of behavior problems in indoor cats, I propose that we, the humans, stop creating these problems. Alleviate boredom by providing lots of fun things to do. Reduce stress by offering your cats access to their basic resources in places where they feel comfortable and secure. The cat's time has come! They have surpassed dogs as the most popular pet in America. It is time that we develop a better understanding of what our feline companions need and do a better job of providing them with those needs. It is time that we start setting our cats up for success!

References

1. Young RJ. *Environmental Enrichment for Captive Animals*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Science; 2003:1-2.

Ingrid Johnson, CCBC
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