



Environmental Enrichment

While we think of cats as independent and self-sufficient pets, it is easy to underestimate how reliant on us they are for their well-being. We are usually good at satisfying their physical needs with feeding, warmth, and medical care, but may not appreciate that their behavioural needs are very different from our own. Providing a rich behavioural environment not only ensures a happy cat, but can reduce behavioural problems such as urine marking. There is also growing evidence that some medical problems, such as cystitis can be triggered by a stressful environment.

What is environmental enrichment?

Environmental enrichment is the adaptation of a cats surroundings to enable them to behave as naturally as possible. It can be considered under the following headings:

- Eating, drinking and toileting
- Playing and hunting
- Physical space
- Interactions with animals and people



Drinking fountain

Eating, drinking and toileting

Cats are naturally solitary animals, and so find competition for basic resources such as food and water stressful. Distributing several food and water bowls and litter trays around the house (ideally one for each cat, and one extra) will help to reduce competition.

Unlike humans, cats do not normally eat and drink at the same time - they prefer not to get their water contaminated by the feathers and guts of their natural food! So keep food and water bowls separate. They are also fussy about their water - try bowls of different shapes and materials to encourage drinking, - or “pet fountains” so they can drink running water. Some cats find rain water or boiled water more palatable than chlorinated tap water.

Make sure litter trays are placed in a private place - cats will feel vulnerable when toileting and like to do it in secret. Some cats may prefer covered litter trays, others open litter trays - so provide both. Again ensure that sufficient litter trays are provided (“one per cat and one extra”).



Playing and hunting

In the wild cats will catch and eat up to twenty small meals a day. Providing two large meals in a bowl isn't natural for their digestive system - and doesn't present much of a challenge either!



Ad lib feeding of dry food will help to replicate this "little and often" feeding pattern, although dry food may not be ideal with some medical conditions such as kidney disease.

While actual hunting probably shouldn't be encouraged, cats can be made to work for their food using feeding toys - either commercial, or home made (such as the "catmosphere") - in which food can be hidden. Hunting behaviour can also be simulated using something as simple as rolled up paper - or more sophisticated toys like laser pointers. These not only keep cats entertained, but provide good exercise as well.

Physical space

Cats are natural climbers, and will use high places both to hide, and to survey their surroundings. It is important to provide "vertical space" for cats, using cat towers, shelving, or "cat trees". Cats will also often take advantage of an upstairs window to look out over the street below.

Cats like "time out", and should be allowed spaces where they can hide away, particularly in a new environment or following the addition of new pets or family. Boxes, airing cupboards, cat baskets may all suffice - offer several options and let the cats decide what and where they prefer!



Interactions with other animals and people

Although naturally solitary animals, cats will benefit from the company of both people and other pets. Playing with cats will help to keep them active and mentally stimulated. They enjoy being stroked and fussed, but only on their own terms - it is important to respect their privacy.

Cats will also enjoy interactions with each other, especially when young - however introducing adult cats to each other can be challenging, and as with people, not all cats get on. Cats and dogs can also make good companions - but only if socialised with each other at an early age.

Environmental enrichment can benefit all cats, but is particularly important for indoor cats, which have limited opportunities to demonstrate their full range of natural behaviour. Further information on the subject can be found on the web-site of International Cat Care at www.icatcare.org/advice/keeping-your-cat-happy/making-your-home-cat-friendly