

Kitten Preparation

Part 4

Environmental Enrichment

Environmental enrichment is a phrase that may not be familiar to you but if it's important that you become familiar with it and what it means to your cat. A boring environment can contribute to problems such as destructive behavior, intercat aggression, depression and anxiety. Under-stimulated cats are at risk of developing boredom-related or stress-relieving behaviors such as over-grooming, chewing inappropriate items, picking on companion pets, retreating into isolation, over-eating, self-mutilation, compulsive behavior and loss of appetite.

Why Environmental Enrichment Works for Cats

First, there's physical health. If your cat is active they have a greater chance of staying in better shape. Their muscles get a good workout, their bones stay strong and they're more likely to develop a normal, healthy appetite.

Now, let's look at the benefits you may not be aware of. A cat that has positive experiences usually has more confidence. Fun, safe environment = happy, confident cat. Stressful or boring environment = unhappy, stressed cat.

Since cats are sensory-driven, if a cat has no tension release, they may come up with one that isn't beneficial. A common anxiety-relieving behavior is over-grooming. The cat may self-groom so much that bald spots appear. By providing outlets for energy release, the cat has something to do so they don't need to engage in destructive behaviors.

Studies have shown when a cat is hunting; a brain chemical (dopamine) is released that creates a feeling of eager anticipation. This release is initially triggered by the sound or scent of prey. Cats enjoy being in hunting mode. Dr. Jaak Panksepp, who was a neuroscientist at Washington State University and a researcher on this topic, referred to this feeling as the Seeking Circuit. An analogy might be the way kids feel on Christmas morning before presents are opened.

When in the seeking circuit, it would make sense that the cat would be less anxious, depressed or bored. Opportunities to experience eager anticipation and exploration are important. Luckily for us, we don't have to supply mice and birds so cats can experience the seeking circuit; it can be done through toys and playtime.

Implementing Environmental Enrichment

You can include food-related environmental enrichment whether you're home or not through food-dispensing toys (aka puzzle feeders). A puzzle feeder in its basic form is simply a plastic ball with a hole in it where dry food randomly falls out as the cat rolls it around. Several manufacturers make a variety of ball-shaped puzzled feeders for dry food. Some puzzle feeder balls have computer chips to enable you to record a voice message for your cat.

You can also make homemade puzzle feeders by using plastic water bottles. Cut holes in them and place some or your cat's entire daily dry food ration inside. Even the round cardboard insert from paper towels works well. Cut holes, put kibble in there and fold the ends closed. If the food kibbles odd-shaped you'll have to cut the holes larger.

The concept of working for food is natural for a hunter; their hard-wired to use their senses and physical skill to get prey. Batting a ball around provides activity and fun as opposed to hunkering down at an over-filled food bowl. The other benefit of puzzler feeders is that the cat will eat slowly.

If you feed wet food you can also set up puzzle feeders. Something as simple as a muffin tin can be a great wet food puzzle feeder. Put a drop of wet food in each compartment. For cats who eat too quickly, you can smoosh the food down a bit so they has to work a little harder for their reward. You can also put wet food in a mug placed on its side so the cat can use their paw to reach for it.

Your Cat's Playtime

Cats benefit from several types of play, including: interactive and object play. Interactive involves you holding a fishing pole-type toy so your cat can concentrate on being the hunter. Move the toy like prey so your cat can practice their hunting skills. To trigger the prey-drive move the toy across or away from the cat's visual field. Don't dangle the toy right in front of their. No self-respecting prey would run to the cat and offer itself up as lunch.

Playtime is also just as much mental as physical so when engaging in interactive play, don't keep the toy in motion. Have it hide, quiver, dart across to another hiding place, etc. Put interactive toys away after playtime so kitty doesn't chew stringed parts and to keep these sessions special.

Object play involves furry mice, crinkle balls and other small toys. Increase the fun factor by placing the toys in objects or in locations that inspire curiosity. Place a furry mouse inside an empty tissue box. Cut paw-sized holes in a box, tape the flaps closed and toss some toys in there. Place a ping pong ball inside a paper bag that's on its side. Have a furry mouse peeking out from the top perch of a cat tree.

Your Cat's Vertical Space

We live in a horizontal world but cats live in a vertical world. Cats often seek out high spots for napping. An elevated location can also become security for a cat, especially in a multicat home. The more vertical space, the more territory the cats have to share. If there's tension between the cats, one kitty may climb to an elevated spot as a display of status. This can often be the display a cat uses instead of physical confrontation. An elevated spot can also be a refuge for a timid cat. They know they're safe there because no one can sneak up behind them.

You can create vertical space with a cat tree. Manufacturers make trees in various heights and configurations. Depending on your budget you can purchase a simple tree or an elaborate one that reaches the ceiling. What's most important is that it's sturdy so if kitty takes a flying leap the tree won't topple over. "U" shaped perches are better than flat ones because cats feel more secure when they can feel their backs up against something.

Cat walks and shelves can add to vertical territory. You can purchase shelves and walkways or you can make your own. You can also install kitty stairs on the walls for the cats to access various shelves and perches. You can make it as elaborate or as simple as you want. In a multicat home, make two sets so one cat never blocks another cat from getting up or down. Visit www.moderncat.net for vertical space ideas from modified bookcases to catwalks.

Window perches are great middle ground options. You can buy perches that attach to windows. Some have heating elements and that's great for winter days where there might be a draft coming in or for older cats who need warmth.

Cats Need Hideaways

Hideaways can be in the form of an "A" or donut-shaped bed. You can even take a box and turn it on its side to make a bed. Line it with a soft towel for your cat's comfort. For a very timid cat cut a hole in the box as an entrance, turn the box upside down and your cat will have a complete hideaway.

No matter how confident your cat may be, always make sure there are options for hiding in the environment. Every cat needs hiding places

Tunnels for Cats

A tunnel can be a wonderful addition to environmental enrichment. You can purchase soft fabric tunnels or make your own using paper bags. If using paper bags, fold a one-inch cuff at the top to make the bag sturdy. Cut the bottoms of the paper bags, fold a cuff around that end and then tape bags together.

Feeding Stations

Your cat will still need their regular feeding station. Give each cat their own food bowl. Community bowls can inspire bullying. Additionally, don't use double feeders with food in one side and water in the other. Food particles can get into the water and make the taste unpleasant. Keep food and water bowls clean and replenish the water bowl with fresh water every day.

Water can be used for enrichment as well. Instead of a plain water bowl, consider using a pet water fountain. This is a good option for cats who like to overturn their water bowls in fun.

Visual Enrichment for Cats

There are cat-entertainment DVDs that showcase prey. Between the visuals and the sound effects, many cats become fascinated. It can be a great way to entertain your cat or jump-start a play session.

Outdoor bird feeders can be very entertaining. Set one up near the window where kitty has a perch or cat tree.

Cats Can Enjoy the Outdoors Safely!

There are companies that make cat enclosures. You can find enclosures that sit in the window as well as ones that can be installed outdoors. Make sure the enclosure is well-constructed and sturdy.

You can also bring the outdoors in by creating opportunities for your cat to enjoy novel scents and textures. In the fall I bring in leaves for my cats to enjoy. They love the scent, crackling sound and texture. Bird feathers are another great option. You can even bring in a log for kitty to scratch on.

Clicker Training and Agility with Cats

Clicker training is effective and fun. A clicker makes a cricket-type sound and once the cat makes the association that the sound means a food reward will follow, you can use the clicker to "mark" positive behaviors. The clicker becomes the bridge between a behavior and the reward. Learn more at www.clickertraining.com.

Agility is something we associate with dogs but cats can do it too. You don't have to enter an agility competition but you can clicker train kitty to a fun obstacle course in your home.

Feline Companionship

Cats are social creatures, despite what you may have been led to believe. If you spend lots of time away from home your cat might benefit from a kitty companion. After a gradual and positive introduction, having a buddy can make a huge difference when it comes to enriching a cat's life.

No More Ho-hum for Kitty

Environmental enrichment is a necessity and not a luxury. It's time to increase the fun factor in your cat's life. Customize whatever you do to fit your cat's age, mobility and health factors. Some cats will obviously be more active than others but every cat can benefit from a more stimulating environment and appropriate enrichment.