

Texas Veterinary Behavior Services

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ENVIRONMENTAL ENRICHMENT SUGGESTIONS FOR CATS

When considering the natural behavior of most felines, it is obvious that the average housecat receives very low levels of environmental stimulation. Most non-domestic animals spend the majority of their time foraging for food. In addition, they must seek out or construct resting areas and avoid predators and other natural hazards. Housecats spend only a small portion of their day eating because they do not have to forage for food. They are kept in static and often monotonous environments.

Insufficient stimulation can cause or exacerbate a number of behavior problems including hyperactivity, destructive chewing, excessive grooming, attention-seeking behavior, compulsive disorders and certain forms of aggression.

Environmental enrichment can encourage a more normal range of behaviors in the animal and serve to constructively occupy the animal's time and aid in reducing "boredom." Not all cats will be able to participate in all the suggestions that follow. Know your cat and its propensity for destroying and/or eating toys. Certain cats should only get certain toys while under direct supervision. All enrichment items should be rotated so the animal does not see the same items repeatedly every day.

- a. Feed the cat from a Buster Cube or Roll-A-Treat ball.
- b. Scatter food out in the grass in the yard or across the floor in your house to make the cat search for each piece.
- c. Stuff Kong toys full of various food items (or the cat's meal) and freeze them overnight before giving them to the cat. (These can be given to the cat unfrozen as well.)
- d. Divide portions of the cat's meal into small used margarine containers with holes cut in them and hide them around the house for the cat to find.
- e. Move the cat's food bowl to a different location in the house every 1 - 2 days so the cat must search for it.
- f. Place cat food or treats inside a cardboard box or old towel/rag and allow the cat to tear the item apart to get to the food inside.
- g. Place sheds from reptiles or insects (or other animal skins) out for the cat to find and investigate.
- h. Place novel scents in the environment using small amounts of spices, herbs, extracts, or synthetic animal scents (e.g. rabbit, quail, squirrel, etc. available from a sporting goods store).
- i. Place vegetables or fruits (e.g. melons, apples, lettuce, squash, watermelon, carrots, celery, etc.) out in the yard or you can hang them from string in the house. (Avoid grapes and raisins.)
- j. Add sugar-free Kool-Aid, Gatorade powder, or bullion (or other broths) to water and freeze into a popsicle in a variety of sizes of Tupperware. You can add various pieces of food items to these: cereal, fruits, vegetables, cat food, cheese, meat, etc.
- k. Give the cat old water bottles or milk jugs made of either cardboard or plastic. You can increase the cat's interest by putting food items inside. (Always remove the plastic rings and the plastic caps before allowing cats to play with these items.)
- l. Give the cat a scratching post or kitty condo. You can apply scents to these or hide food in or on them.

- m. Obtain ornamental “cat shelves” that can be mounted on walls in decorative patterns.
- n. Make single cat sized perches on windowsills (these can be purchased commercially), in bookcases, on appliances, etc. Rotate the location of these perches periodically. (Note that many cats enjoy resting in the sun and will move to find such spots throughout the day.)
- o. Give the cat a stuffed toy to attack and “beat up.” Placing catnip on the toy may increase the cat’s interest. (Note that not all cats respond to catnip.)
- p. Give the cat access to paper bags or cardboard boxes.
- q. Cats frequently like large mobile-like toys that move and jerk when they swat at them.
- r. Offer clean natural wood branches for the cat to chew.
- s. Certain bird toys may be acceptable for cats and more appealing than dog or cat toys.
- t. Offer kitty grass or other sprouted plants.
- u. Be sure the cat has both toys (e.g. squeakies, rope toys, stuffed animals, rubber toys, balls, etc.) and chewing items (Nylabone, Gummabone, rawhide bones, cat grass, etc.). These two types of toys serve different purposes.
- v. Train your cat to wear a harness and leash so you can walk the cat outside.

These are merely a few suggestions to get you started. Feel free to be imaginative and come up with your own ideas. If you are unsure whether a particular idea is safe for your cat, please consult with your veterinarian.