

# 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.

**Enrichment should stimulate all the cat's senses: odor, sight, hearing, tactile, and taste.**

### **Hunting: Play and Predation**

The purpose is to provide an outlet for your cat to give your cat an outlet for natural predatory/hunting behavior.

- Give the cat a large 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.) Example: Yeowww! Banana is one type of catnip filled toy.
- Make or purchase a peekaboo box with holes in it, and place toys inside for cat to dig out. Try fluffy toys, mouse toys, and sisal rope toys. Example: Peek-A-Prize Cat Box
- Purchase a cat wheel for exercise. Example: One Fast Cat Exercise Wheel
- Save a soda bottle top. Use a hot glue gun to attach the bottle cap to a sturdy string. Add a wooden dowel to make the toy user-friendly. Use as an interactive string toy.
- Divide the cat's food into several small portions and place them in various locations throughout the house, so your cat has to "hunt" for the food source.
- Purchase and release crickets from the pet store into your bathtub or shower and let your cat hunt them. You can also place the crickets in a large plastic storage container and let the cat jump inside to hunt them.

- Purchase a string toy, feather toy or similar that is attached to a stick. Run cat toy across the field of vision for cat to engage prey drive. Let cat win occasionally, but do not leave them alone to chew on the toy. Example: Cat Dancer or Neko Fly Toys. The Da Bird toy is a particularly stimulating string toy for cats and mimics the sound of bird wings.
- Train your cat to wear a harness and leash so you can walk the cat outside. Refer to the book, Here Kitty Kitty by Catherine Cawmer, for instructions. (Remember flea prevention.)

## **Eating: Foraging Enrichment**

- Feed the cat from a food cube or ball. Example: Eggsercizer, Fish Bowl, Buster Cube or Roll-A-Treat ball.
- Scatter food out in the grass in the yard or across the floor in your house to make the cat search for each piece.
- Stuff Kong toys full of various food items (or the cat's meal).
- 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. When the cat plays with the container, food will fall out of the holes.
- Divide the cat's food into several small portions and place them in various locations throughout the house, so your cat has to "hunt" for the food source.
- Move the cat's food bowl to a different location in the house every 1-2 days so the cat must search for it.
- 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. The smellier the food, the better.
- If your cat likes them, hang vegetables or fruits (e.g. melons, apples, lettuce, squash, watermelon, carrots, celery, etc.) from string in the house. (Avoid grapes and raisins, as they can be poisonous.)
- Freeze yogurt or bullion (or other broths) 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. Bullion pops can be used during clicker training as a reward, and it is great for use during leash training.
- 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 before allowing cats to play with these items.)

## **Exploration and Sensory Stimulation**

- Place sheds from reptiles or insects (or other animal skins) out for the cat to find and investigate. You often can find these at pet stores (e.g. snake sheds) or hobby stores (animal furs).
- Place novel scents in the environment using small amounts of spices, herbs, extracts, essential oils, or synthetic animal scents (e.g. rabbit, quail, squirrel, etc. available from a sporting goods store).
- Provide the cat with tall kitty condos or towers. You can apply scents to these or hide food in or on them. Example: Lotus Cat Tower
  - These should be placed near windows if possible.
- Provide the cat with several scratching surfaces, both vertical and horizontal. Example: The Cat Scratch Lounge or Classy Kitty Sisal Cat Post.
  - Cardboard scratchers are particularly appealing to cats.
- Obtain ornamental "cat shelves" that can be mounted on walls in decorative patterns. Example: Catastrophic Creations
- 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.)
- Give the cat access to paper bags or cardboard boxes. For added fun, set them up in a maze and create tunnels.
    - Rotate boxes so the cat does not lose interest. Boxes of different sizes and shapes provide different tactile stimulation to your cat. New boxes also provide new odors for the cat to investigate.
  - Cats frequently like large mobile-like toys that move and jerk when they swat at them.
  - Offer clean natural wood branches for the cat to chew.
  - Certain bird toys may be acceptable for cats and more appealing than dog or cat toys.
  - Offer kitty grass or other sprouted grasses such as oats, millet or milo.
  - Provide both play toys (e.g. squeakies, rope toys, stuffed animals, rubber toys, balls, etc.) and chewing items (small rawhide chews, sweet potato chews, , cat grass, etc.). These two types of toys serve different purposes. Try playing nature DVDs which include sights and sounds of birds, squirrels, water, etc. Example: Cat Sitter DVD
  - Provide a water fountain which mimics the sound of a waterfall or water stream. Your cat might enjoy the sound or ability to drink water from a flowing.
  - Purchase a pet stroller to take your cat out on walks if leash walking is unavailable. This option is good for city dwellers that must worry about dogs in close proximity who are not familiar with cats. While this does not allow your cat to hunt, it does allow the cat to see, hear and smell new stimuli in a safe manner.

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.

## Suggested Retailers

- amazon.com
- hauspanther.com
- therefinedfeline.com
- thecatball.com
- catastrophiccreations.com
- petcube.com
- clickertraining.com
- jacksongalaxy.com
- nekoflies.com
- purrfectplay.com
- <http://foodpuzzlesforcats.com>
- <https://www.catastrophiccreations.com/product-category/the-cat-mod-systems/>