



Island Cats

Veterinary Hospital

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Selecting the Right Environmental Enrichment for Your Cat

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Section: Environmental Enrichments for Your Cat

Cats, especially indoor cats, need stimulation and recreation to maintain their good mental health. This is often referred to as “environmental enrichment or environmental enhancements”.

So, what does that mean exactly? It means that for some cats to be “happy” and to minimize behavioral problems of indoor cats or multi-cat environments, it is important that your cat have plenty of toys, places to hide, perch, sleep, places or things to “scratch”, things to “watch”, and opportunities to play. It is also important that cats have a place that they perceive as safe to eat, drink and eliminate.

This can be accomplished by providing an environment with cat trees, perches, bags, beds, toys, and trusted spots to sleep, eat and use the litter box.

Refuge

Small refuges where cats feel safe can be as simple as paper bags or cardboard boxes. Places to hide may be a favorite box under the bed, a pet taxi or carrier behind a chair, or on a towel on top of a dresser. Cats tend to prefer to be high where they can constantly assess their environment. They prefer to sleep and rest in areas where they feel safe and are comfortable.

In households with other cats or dogs, it is important that they cats be able to get away from the dog if they want to. This is especially true for litter box and food placement. They should be able to eat and eliminate without being bothered by dogs or other cats.

Cat Furniture or Perches

Some authorities estimate that cats need about 500 square feet per cat to minimize behavioral problems. One way to help make a cat’s environment richer, bigger, and safer is to give them some extra vertical places. Perches are simply a high area with a view or vantage point.

Cats love to climb and high places make them feel secure. From a high spot, cats can watch their environment and identify both prey and predator. Although your cat may be indoors only and out of reach of prey or predator, cats don’t lose this instinct. Cats feel most vulnerable when they sleep and generally prefer higher areas, such as a cat tree or perch, for their naps.

Multiple perches or cat trees are ideal as some cats prefer to watch their environment from different vantage points. This is especially important in multi-cat households as more than one cat can “perch” at a time. Windowsill perches are also good.

Cat trees and perches come in a variety of sizes, styles and colors. The most common cat tree is made of carpet and some form of pegs to hold the horizontal surfaces. They can vary from a couple feet tall to 10 to 12 feet tall with lots of branches and spots to sleep, play, or rest. They can be combined with beds, attached dangling toys, and scratching posts. Perches can be in or on a cat tree, on a piece of furniture such as a dresser or bed, or on a table.

Scratching Stimulation

It is important to have places in your home where your cat is welcome to scratch. This is especially important in with claws, however, just because a cat does not have their claws, does not mean they don't have the instinct to "scratch". Scratching is a natural instinct for cats to sharpen their claws, stretch, shed old nails, and leave their scent.

Consider what substrates or locations your cat likes to scratch? Does he or she stretch out when they scratch? Does he scratch on furniture legs, the backs of fabric chairs or ...along the carpeted floor. This information can help you determine which substrate your might prefer such as cardboard, fabric, carpet or wood and the surface type such as vertical areas or horizontal surfaces. If your cat stretches out when they scratch, make sure you choose a scratching surface that is tall enough to accommodate your cat.

Most scratching posts are made out of tree material, cardboard, rope, or fabric which can all work well. If you don't know what your cat prefers, you may want to try a couple types to ensure your cat has a favorite. A good combination is a cardboard horizontal scratcher and a vertical carpeted post. Multi-cat households should have several scratching spots. Make sure the post is secure and can not be moved or knocked over either hurting or scaring your cat. Because scent marking is a part of scratching, cats often like to scratch in common places in the house where you or other cats spend time. This may include doorways, bedrooms, kitchens or living rooms and in areas where they spend their times, such as near favorite sleeping and eating areas.

Visual Stimulation

Cats are often very stimulated by their vision. They love toys that swing and movement. A window bed is often a favorite spot for cats to nap or watch the outside environment. This is especially good if they have a few of a tree or some natural elements, even birds. There are commercially available window beds or you can move a chair, secure table or bench next to a window for your cat. If a window is not an option, some cats like nature shows or videos.

Play

First, let's consider play. Consider your cat's toy preference? Does your cat prefer toys that mimic birds, mice or catching bugs? There are many types of toys made for cats and each cat has their own preferences as to what stimulates them to interact. Favored toys mimic predatory acts that cats would perform if they were to hunt for their food. Although your cat may not need to "hunt", they still enjoy the actions and movements involved with the process and create a form of play from this act.

Here are some tips to help you choose some products to enhance your cat's environment. tips to help you choose some products to enhance your cat's environment.

Desirable Features

- If choosing cat trees... a size large enough to accommodate your cat(s)
- Safe – make sure furniture is stable

- Easy to clean/wash if possible
- Durable
- Interesting to the personality of your cat

Ideal Choice

Products that provide environmental stimulation covers a lot of product types and the ideal choice may depend on your home, your cat's preferences and your budget. Some good choices to enhance your cats environment may include:

- Cat Tree - A basic 5 to 6 foot tall cat tree that has a perch and a spot for scratching where your cat can really stretch out. This perch on the cat should have a good view of the room and even view to the outside if possible.
- Perch - If it is not possible for the cat tree to have a view of the outdoors, consider a window perch. You can move a table, chair or bench near the wall.
- Scratching Post - Buy a cardboard scratching post that can used vertically or horizontally and place it as your cat prefers.
- Toys - Good toy choices are a feathery flyer, some round crinkle balls, a laser pointer and something stuffed with catnip to determine your cats preferences and offer a variety.

Shopping Tips

- Choose cat trees that are sturdy and safe. Evaluate them to determine if they are likely to "tip" or fall over.
- Don't buy toys with strings, buttons, small parts or loose fabric. Stuffed toys and rope toys are not recommended because dogs can chew through them ingesting the fabric or chew off parts like the eyes causing a life threatening intestinal obstruction or a choking hazard.

More Tips

- Provide more than one perch or surface for your cat.
- Make sure your cat has a good refuge to hide from other cats or dogs. Use a box or pet taxi or special bed.
- All chew toys have a certain element of risk involved. Extra strong chewers can tear apart just about anything. But with forethought and supervision, you can make your cats toys as safe as possible.
- Rotate toys periodically to keep your cat "interested"

Further reading:

[Think Like a Cat: How to Raise a Well-Adjusted Cat](#) Johnson-Bennett, Pam

[Psycho Kitty: Tips For Solving Your Cat's "Crazy" Behavior](#), Johnson-Bennett, Pam

www.WelcomeYourCat.com (Animal Behavior Associates)

www.vet.osu.edu/747.htm (Indoor Cat Initiative)

