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Environmental Enrichment for Dogs & Cats



Many dogs are alone for long periods every day and most cats are now kept entirely indoors. What suggestions can I give clients to help them provide an enriched and stimulating environment for their companions?

Meeting the social, exploratory, play, and exercise needs of companion animals is essential. Most owners are unaware of the specific needs of dogs and cats and may fail to meet them, but the inability to express normal behavior patterns may lead to undesirable pet behavior.¹ Problems associated with limited environmental stimulation include eating disorders, attention-seeking behaviors, anxiety-related behaviors, compulsive disorders, self-injurious behaviors, and aggression.²

Specific breeds of dogs have been developed to perform certain functions. Terriers, for example, were originally bred to seek out, catch, and kill various animals and vermin. Herding breeds of dogs often like to chase, while hunting breeds enjoy stalking. Understanding the basic nature of your dog's breed may help prevent problem behaviors. When the dog's needs are denied, it can cause problems between owner and pet.

Cats' natural behavior must also be considered when animals reside solely indoors. Outdoor cats spend a great deal of time hunting. Indoors, this behavior may translate into playful but aggressive attacks on owners or other animals in the home. Cats are also accomplished climbers, and often end up perching on places that owners prefer they wouldn't. Marking its

indoor territory using claws and urine is another normal, but objectionable, feline behavior.

Like all family members, dogs and cats need an environment that is secure, safe, novel, and complex enough to meet their needs. They should, to some extent, control their environment and what happens to them, and have the opportunity for meaningful human interaction.

Techniques for Use in Dogs* Exploratory Opportunities

These can include leash walks, feeder toys, and the provision of scent items to "hunt" in the environment.

Exercise

The amount of daily exercise needed depends on the breed and age of the dog. Some dogs may be content with a short leash walk, while others prefer jogging or longer treks. A lively game of "fetch" or, for certain dogs, a controlled game of tug of war can also meet exercise needs, and many dogs enjoy water play in an outdoor kiddie pool. If the dog cannot be walked because of unruly or aggressive behaviors, these issues should be addressed through

additional consultation and training with management products such as a head halter or a no-pull harness.

Human Interaction

While petting a dog classifies as interaction, many dogs want more—they want to play with their owners. Play between people and dogs differs from the play between dogs and may satisfy a different motivation. For example, when playing interactively with humans using toys, dogs are more likely to "give up" in a game than when interacting with other dogs.³ Teaching tricks, learning obedience tasks, agility training, playing fetch, and other interactive activities should be scheduled daily. Predictable routines and consistent rules also seem to help keep dogs calm and diminish anxiety.⁴

Mental Stimulation

Many breeds of dogs were bred to work all day and enjoy being engaged in time-consuming tasks. Training to perform various obedience tasks, learning tricks, or teaching the dog to identify and find toys can all be enriching. Organized classes in agility, dancing (see www.worldcaninefreestyle.org), and more not only enrich the dog but improve the human-animal bond.

*Not all techniques are suitable for all dogs.

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Interactions with Other Dogs

Some dogs are very social and, if exposed at an early age, will enjoy opportunities to interact and play with other dogs. These encounters should be controlled interactions with like-minded and trained individuals. Dog parks may provide this opportunity, but dogs with aggressive tendencies or poor social skills should not be brought to a dog park.

Feeding

Food should be provided at regular times daily and water should always be available. In homes with multiple dogs, separation during feeding may diminish normal canine competition for food and decrease anxiety.

Techniques for Use in Cats*

Feeding

Feral cats spend a significant amount of their time foraging for food, so increasing the complexity of obtaining food may enrich the environment for an indoor-only cat. Options include feeder toys, placing multiple food bowls throughout the home, leaving small portions in different bowls during the day, hiding treats in boxes and bags in various areas of the home, or providing food puzzles.⁵ Food bowls should be plentiful in multiple-cat homes.

Climbing, Perching, Resting, & Hiding

These can be simple structures—a place on a bookshelf cleared for the cat, windowsills and window perches, commercially made cat towers, or elaborate custom-made structures. Cat beds, tunnels, boxes, or paper bags can also be provided. Books are available that detail home

*Not all techniques are suitable for all cats.



A wide variety of climbing towers and play gyms are commercially available for cats.

modifications that can be made such as cat walks and cat shelves. When given a choice, it appears that some cats prefer soft materials for resting.⁶ Suggestions include chenille, wool, felt, fleece, or even paper. Boxes for hiding and places to get under and behind should also be provided, especially in multiple-cat homes.

Scratching Behavior

Because scratching is a normal feline behavior, providing an acceptable outlet is essential. Scratching posts that are easily accessible and placed in an area frequented by the cat are more likely to be used. Sisal is often a preferred substrate for scratching, but owners should be encouraged to experiment to find what is suitable for their cats.

Olfactory & Visual Stimulation

Some cats prefer catnip, and others may be calmed by pheromones diffused into the air. Many cats also like to look out windows and/or enjoy cat videos.



Toys

Recent research indicates that rotating toys increases play and minimizes habituation of the play response.⁷ When a cat stops playing with a certain toy after only 5 minutes, removing the toy and substituting it with another will cause play to resume again at a high level. Cats seem to prefer toys that are light, move easily, and can be picked up. Wand-type toys may be preferred by some cats, but require owner participation. Care should be exercised to avoid toys that can be ingested. String can cause intestinal obstruction and intussusception and should be avoided.

Human Interaction

Most cats enjoy being with their caregivers. This can be simply sitting on the lap or nearby for some, while others enjoy petting, grooming, and even training. Time should be scheduled daily for meaningful interaction.

Toileting Areas

Litter boxes should be provided in private, quiet but accessible areas. In multiple-cat homes, litter boxes should be provided in many locations, with at least one box per cat.

With a little planning and by setting aside time to be with their pets, owners can provide an enriching and stimulating environment that meets their companions' needs. ■

See Aids & Resources, back page, for references, contacts, and appendices.

Article archived on www.cliniciansbrief.com

WHAT TO DO

Dogs

- Schedule daily activities such as walks and playtime
- Provide predictable and regular human interactions
- Supply appropriate toys
- Allow for interaction with other dogs

Cats

- Provide foraging opportunities
- Supply climbing, perching, and hiding areas
- Provide olfactory, visual, and marking opportunities
- Offer appropriate play items
- Engage in daily interactions with cats