
Healthy & Happy Indoor Cat

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INTRODUCTION

Cats can be happily kept inside all the time. Many people do so and would have it no other way. They say they have deeper and more satisfying relationships with their cats and that those cats are healthier and live longer. While living happily inside, cats are not getting hit by cars, being injured in cat fights, catching infections such as feline leukemia virus and feline immunodeficiency virus (Feline "AIDS"), being stolen, hunting and possibly killing wildlife, urinating and defecating on neighbors' properties, and harassing or being harassed by other animals. Clearly there are many good reasons for permanently keeping cats indoors and outdoors in a protected area.

PHYSIOLOGICAL REACTIONS TO STRESS

An outdoor cat lives a more stressful life than an indoor cat, and stress leads to a myriad of physical and psychological disorders. When faced with a challenge, the cat "gears up"; the heart rate increases, blood flow to the internal organs increases, and stored sugar is released into the bloodstream, ready to meet increased demands for energy. Many of these immediate effects are triggered by the release of the hormone- adrenalin from the adrenal glands. The body is now ready to "fight" or "flee," depending on the circumstances. If the challenge persists, other hormones are released, among them ACTH (adrenocorticotrophic hormone) from the pituitary gland. ACTH in turn causes the release of still more hormones, such as cortisone and hydrocortisone from the adrenal glands. These hormones help to continue the supply of energy-sustaining sugars. Finally, should the perceived threat continue, the previously adaptive system starts to break down. Chronic exposure to corticosteroids and other substances can cause organ systems to start degenerating, resulting in such negative effects as decreased immune response, stomach ulcers, and decreased growth to name but a few. Variation in the body's response is based on the type of threat it is exposed to.

Outdoor cats on the street, or even in the country, are faced every day with territorial disputes, threats from other animals, people, cars, environmental noises which cause panic, and situations which generate pure fear and stress. Indoor cats generally live longer, healthier and happier lives than outdoor cats - a fact that cannot be disputed.

ISN'T IT CRUEL?

Some people feel that it is cruel to confine cats because they think of them as "free spirits" that should be allowed to roam at will because of their nature. They seem to give little thought to the possible consequences listed above. So, how can we resolve this dilemma? We can do so by enriching the daily life of the indoor cat to replace some of the stimulation and activity it would otherwise receive as a freeroaming animal. This environmental enrichment puts complexity, unpredictability and choices into a cat's daily life. Without these things, many animals and people become frustrated in confinement and show signs of boredom-greater reactivity, irritability and exaggerated or unusual behavior.

HOW IS IT DONE?

Environmental enrichment aims to satisfy a cat's need for interaction with its environment.. This can be done

in many ways, some of which suit some cats better than others. Cats are notoriously individualistic. Some activities involve the owner in active participation, while others just have to be set up and left for the cat to use when it wishes. By doing more for their cats, owners also enrich their own lives.

Chasing and Jumping

Small fast-moving objects cause the innate chase response in kittens. Most mature cats will continue to show it, particularly when they have practiced it all their lives. This can be done with small balls, such as practice golf balls that are hollow and have holes in the surface, or items such as scrunched up pieces of newspaper, pulled quickly and erratically on the end of a string. Some people even tie the objects onto fishing lines and poles so that they can cast out and move the object over a bigger area without the cat seeing them do so. Furry, feathery or flapping things are particularly attractive to cats. Patches of bright light, such as the reflection from a watch face or mirror, often get cats chasing. A hand-held laser pointer that gives a brilliant red spot under any household conditions is a very convenient way of exercising cats. Some cats, particularly the younger ones, will jump and strike at soap bubbles, which should be made from non-toxic soap.



Feeding

We can make feeding more natural by getting our cats to search for food and by providing it in a form that needs chewing. If you feed dry food, you could put it in small clumps on the floor progressively farther away from the bowl each day. The clumps can eventually be scattered throughout the house in different places each day so that your cat has to search them out.

Obedience Work

It might sound a bit radical, but cats can be obedience trained with the same principles of positive reinforcement as dogs. Why do you think they suddenly appear when the refrigerator door is being opened? That is not innate behavior; it has been learned. It's amazing what will be learned when you are hungry and your behavior results in food being given. Cats can easily be taught to come, sit, stay, lie down, and retrieve. Reward the desired behavior immediately as it occurs. Break down the learning task into small steps and start at the beginning. Train with very small pieces of the most palatable food. In this way, your cat will just get a taste and not a stomach full, which will satisfy its hunger. Once you have taught several commands, they can be randomized in order and times of day they are given. Such a training session, particularly when it entails working on a new command, will add complexity, unpredictability and choice to your cat's daily life.

Watching an Interesting Scene

Given the choice, cats will vote with their feet and show us that they like to watch a changing scene. They will choose to sit or lie for long periods in safe places where they can watch the world go by, whether it is street activity, people or animals. With a little bit of thought, we can usually provide that safe and interesting area.

High-Level Walkways



One way cats can get to a vantage point is by jumping or climbing. You can make this easier and encourage them to use the height of the rooms by providing walkways between high points. Shelves can be strategically placed on walls, or narrow pieces of timber can be placed between beams.

Indoor "Tree"

A convenient way of cats getting access to high points is up a tall scratching post that they will climb as though it were a tree. If the cat cannot climb, for instance if the cat is older, then a series of shelves could be embedded in a tall post. The cat can then climb by jumping from shelf to shelf.



Get-Away Areas

Given the chance, many cats will lie for long periods in small high places from where they can watch the activity below and presumably feel secure. It is a good idea to provide access to such areas for anxious cats and where there is more than one cat in the house. This can be easily done by closing the lid of a cardboard box of suitable size (about 14" x 12" x 10" for an average sized cat). Turn it upside down and cut a hole in the middle of one end just big enough for the cat to get in and out. Put

in an unwashed garment, such as an old sweatshirt of its favorite person, and place in the highest accessible place in the house. As they are so cheap and quick to make, you can experiment with several of them in different places. High-level walkways, very tall scratching posts or indoor "trees" can give access to these places.

Scratching Post

Cats can be trained to use a scratching post and not to use other surfaces for their stretching and scratching exercises. Cut pile carpet is an attractive surface through which they can drag their claws. However, a material that can be torn out is preferred. This may be a loosely woven material or a soft wood composition board. The scratchable surface could be firmly attached to a post at least two feet high that is firmly held in position, usually by a heavier base. The forefeet of kittens can be gently placed up the post and drawn down it. By rewarding the kitten with praise and stroking while it is scratching and food when it has finished, it usually quickly learns to exclusively use an attractive post.

Shouting at or spraying a cat with a water pistol is likely to reduce scratching in your presence. However scratching may well still be done in your absence. This can be diverted by temporarily putting a scratching post in front of the scratched surface that is protected by a non-scratchable cover such as wood, steel or thick plastic. Reward the cat for using the post. When it is using it consistently, then move it less than a foot each day toward an acceptable position. As cats tend to stretch and scratch after a rest, the post is best placed close to the cat's sleeping area. You may find it helps to have a scratching post in each room. Once the cat is using the post in the new position, the protection over the scratched area can be removed. If the cat goes back to scratch the area you find undesirable, it means that surface is more attractive than the post. The post could be made more attractive and/or mousetraps could be hung with their bottoms facing out on the surface you don't want the cat to scratch. When the cat touches the back of the trap, it springs out from the scratched surface and cannot snap shut on the cat's paw. There are soft plastic "paddle" attachments commercially available for mousetraps to reduce the chances of a cat getting hurt. They also increase the visual impact of the trap going off .

The effects of scratching can be reduced by regular trimming of the cat's nails or by gluing rounded plastic tips over the ends of the nails (e.g., SoftPaws™).

There are different attitudes about declawing cats to stop scratching problems. While it is still not uncommonly done in the USA and Canada, it is very rarely seen in Australia, New Zealand and Great Britain and in many other countries. The present policy of the Australian Veterinary Association is that the removal of claws, particularly those that are weight bearing, to prevent damage to furnishings is not acceptable.

Paper Bags and Boxes

They say that "Curiosity killed the cat," and watching cats check out newly arrived containers shows how keen they are at investigating. Allowing them access to these new shapes and smells will add novelty to their lives.

Entertainment Box

Taking advantage of their wellknown tendency to investigate things with their paws, we can put small objects inside a box in which there are holes through which the cat can put its paws but through which it would be very difficult to remove the objects. Such entertainment centers are also commercially available.

Catnip, Cat Mint and Cat Grasses

These plants can be successfully grown indoors in pots from seeds or small plants that are commercially available. Many cats will visit a catnip plant each day to sniff, rub, grasp, roll alongside and kick at it. This seems to be play and can be observed by both sexes of reproductive age, whether or not they have been neutered. Catmint and cat grasses are attractive to many cats and are more likely to be chewed than some of your other indoor plants. This gives the cats fresh vegetation to eat, which they would otherwise do outdoors.

Trips Outside

Most cats enjoy a trip outside whether it is on a lead and collar or harness, in their owners' arms, or in cars. They can be trained to walk on a lead by reinforcing the walking forward with tiny pieces of favorite food. The differing sights, sounds and smells add to daily variation in stimulation.

Outdoor Enclosures

Various structures can be used to allow cats out into fresh air but restricting their movements to certain areas. Wire netting can be used to enclose an area alongside the house just like an aviary for birds. Enclosures of different sizes can be used in different sites with tunnels between them and the house. A modular system allows for expansion to a wide range of circumstances.

Companion Cat



For cats that are left on their own for long periods each day, it is a good idea to provide a feline companion. Sociable interaction will enrich their daily lives. The younger they are introduced, the greater the chances of getting along amicably most of the time. There may still be fights and chases that are not playful but seem to be part of normal living. Getting littermates gives you the best chances of a pair getting along. Where other cats are to be introduced, it is preferable to do so when they are kittens, and to have them arrive at the property at the same time. Urine-spraying and fighting are less likely when all the cats are spayed females as compared to having one or more neutered males in the house. Bringing older cats together, particularly when one has been resident for some time, may lead to hissing and fighting, defecation and urination out of the litter tray, urine-spraying and one or more cats becoming reclusive. Tolerance can increase with time and by using such methods as: feeding them progressively

closer and closer together; rubbing them alternately with the same unwashed towel to transfer their smells between each other.

SUMMARY

An outdoor cat lives a more stressful life than an indoor cat, and stress leads to a myriad of physical and psychological disorders. Outdoor cats on the street, or even in the country, are faced every day with territorial disputes, threats from other animals, people, cars, environmental noises which cause panic, and situations which generate pure fear. Indoor cats generally live longer and healthier lives than outdoor cats - a fact that cannot be disputed.

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