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STRENGTHENING THE HUMAN – ANIMAL CONNECTION

Environmental Enrichment for Cats

With the increased number of cats living an indoor lifestyle, environmental enrichment has become a popular and extremely important topic. In general, indoor cats are healthier and live longer because they are not subject to risks associated with predation, trauma and infections. But, in order to keep our feline housemates happy and healthy we need to provide them with an environment that is both stimulating and relatively stress-free.

Our pint-size predators not only thrive on predictability but also need daily exposure to those things that stimulate their predatory side. Cats whose needs are not met emotionally, mentally and physically are stressed. This stress can have not only emotional effects, but also physical effects. Multiple scientific studies have looked at stress and Feline idiopathic cystitis – “FIC” (see handout: Feline Lower Urinary Tract Disease). We now know that stress plays a role in the development of FIC and that enriching the cats’ environments, along with decreasing known stressors, can be very helpful in preventing clinical signs.

So, how do we enrich our indoor environment? Recommendations are based on typical behavior patterns of free-ranging domestic cats. We need to provide them with opportunities to do what their free-ranging counterparts would do. Free-roaming cats spend 40% of the time sleeping, 22% of the time resting, 15% of the time hunting, 15% of the time grooming, 3% of the time travelling (roaming not associated with hunting), and 2% of the time eating.

Since sleeping and resting take up over 60% of their day, careful consideration should go into supplying the cat with suitable (preferred by cats) resting/sleeping areas. The following are considered by cats to be preferred sleep choices:

1. Three-dimensional space (cat towers with resting areas) – These products increase the relative space of the cat’s environment which is important to cats, especially those that live with other cats.
2. Perches are preferred over the ground.
3. Upholstered areas are preferred over slick surfaces.
4. Single cat sized area = therefore no others can join in.
5. Plentiful areas to choose from.

Hunting and eating (exploration) utilize 17% of a typical housecat’s time each day. Since indoor cats do not hunt for their food we can simulate this type of activity with food dispensing toys such as Egg-Cersizer (by Premier Pet Products), Slim Cat food ball, and encouraging a treasure hunt for food and treats. For multi-cat homes it is important to have food and water stations throughout the house being sure to have a station in each cat’s “core” area (the area where each cat spends the bulk of their day). Studies show that cats prefer to eat individually in a quiet location. If a diet change is desired, offering the new diet in a dish adjacent to the regular diet allows kitty to adjust to the change slowly. Playing with the cat is also a great way to use up kitty energy. Toys, particularly those that are small, move, and mimic prey characteristics appeal to many cats. Since cats prefer novelty, a variety of toys should be offered and rotated regularly to sustain their interest.

Cats also tend to have preferences in regard to water. Water-related factors to consider include:

- * Freshness (clean the dish frequently) – offer fresh water daily.
- * Taste
- * Movement (water fountains, dripping faucets, aquarium pump-bubbled air into a bowl)
- * Shape of container (some cats prefer wide dish so whiskers don’t touch the bowl when drinking)
- * Changes in water-related factors should be offered in a way that allows the cat to express its preferences.

Litter box recommendations: The typical cat prefers the box to be in a quiet area, free of noise and traffic (one box per cat plus one more; typically on each floor of the home and near each cat's core area). There should be various exit routes so kitty won't feel vulnerable and can't be ambushed. Large, uncovered boxes are preferred (consider using plastic storage bins – especially for large cats). Clumping, unscented clay litter tends to be preferred and boxes should be kept clean with daily or twice daily scooping and regular dumping and washing of the box (monthly – with mild cleaner). Avoid any citrus or floral scents in or anywhere near the litter box.

Space: The physical environment should include opportunities for scratching (horizontal and vertical options in prominent areas), climbing, hiding, and resting. In multi-cat homes, cats often each have their own "core" area where they tend to spend much of their day. Food, water, resting, climbing and scratching options should be available in each core area with a litter box near this area. Cats seem to prefer to monitor their surroundings from elevated vantage points. Climbing frames, hammocks, platforms, raised walkways, shelves or window seats may appeal to them. Some cats also enjoy sound and visual enrichment such as a radio, video, or a view of nearby bird feeders.

If the cat lives in a home with other cats, other animals such as dogs, multiple humans including children, there is bound to be some level of conflict for the cat but the goal should be to reduce unhealthy conflict to a manageable level. In addition to being solitary hunters of small prey, cats are small prey themselves for other predators, including dogs. Offering ways to escape dogs and rambunctious kids will alleviate stress for many cats.

The most common cause of conflict between indoor cats is competition for resources. Cats may engage in silent or open conflict over space, food, water, litter boxes, perches, sunny areas, safe places where the cat can watch its environment, or attention from humans. Open conflict is easy to recognize (stalking, hissing, piloerecting progressing to swatting, wrestling and biting) and is most likely to occur when a new cat is introduced and when cats reach social maturity between 2 and 5 years of age. Cats that are familiar with each other but unevenly matched often show conflict in more subtle ways. (See Table 1). Silent conflicts may not even be recognized until the threatened cat begins to hide from the assertive cat, starts to hiss or fight back when it sees the other cat, or develops a health problem. Conflict-related urine marking can be exhibited by either the assertive or the threatened cat but Feline Idiopathic Cystitis usually occurs in the threatened cat. Cats that exhibit inappropriate elimination often do so because either their access to the litter box is blocked by another cat or because the location of the box is such that there is no escape route in case of ambush.

Providing adequate vertical space and resources can help alleviate some feline friction, but improving the cats' relationship through behavior modification is often necessary. For those individuals that can't co-exist, partial or full segregation may be needed. Behavior-modifying medication may be useful but it cannot replace environmental enrichment.