

Feline Enrichment: Brain Dead Fat Cats

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Enrichment is quite the Buzz Word

- Environmental
- Behavioral

A matter of manipulating the environment to suit animals' behavior or the match the animal's behavior with the environment.

"Environmental enrichment is a process for improving or enhancing zoo animal environments and care within the context of their inhabitant's behavioral biology and natural history. It is a dynamic process in which changes to structures and husbandry practices are made with the goal of increasing the behavioral choice available to animals and drawing out their species-appropriate behaviors and abilities, thus enhancing their welfare. As the term implies, enrichment typically involves the identification and subsequent addition to the zoo environment of a specific stimulus or characteristic that the occupant(s) needs but which was not previously present."

"The physical environment in the primary enclosures must be enriched by providing means of expressing non-injurious species-typical activities. Examples of environmental enrichment include providing perches, swings, mirrors, and other increased cage complexities; providing objects to manipulate; varied food items; using foraging or task-oriented feeding methods; and providing interaction with the care giver or other familiar and knowledgeable person consistent with personnel safety precautions."

Zoos have long been interested and have participated in providing animals with behavioral enrichment, more than what our companion animals at home receive.

Zoos feeding road kill, hiding food (underground debris, in pipes, etc.) in exhibits, using 'giant buster cubes,' operant conditioning, orangutan's who paint, chimpanzees who use computers – even allowing great apes to choose their own music. Simply allowing them to choose, indoors or outdoors. Rotating objects in the exhibit which seem stationary, but are not, places to sit to the vines. Choose to give themselves a shower if they so desire. If they pass by a motion detector, they get a shower. A light lets them know that food is in the termite mound, and a condiment inside for chimps varies (mustard, catsup, barbeque cause, jams, etc). Optimum examples are chimpanzees in Chicago, who can blow air on the people.

It's about offering choices and giving control. The secret is to think like a cat – lion or a domestic cat.

Using enrichment techniques, zoos have: Lessened stereotypical behaviors, increased animals 'natural tendencies,' enhanced exercise (lowering number of overweight animals, or animals as overweight), slowed the aging process, lessened or eliminated anxious behaviors

Presumably if enrichment techniques can help zoo animals, they can help our companion animals....

Or simply, what grandpa said. "If you don't use it, you lose it." Millions of our purring pals are brain dead – they've lost it upstairs while at the same time they've gained it around their middles. And their owners have no idea because that is how they expect cats to be.

At least 30 to 40 per cent of pets are overweight; 25 per cent obese – and even greater number in cats. These tubby tabbies likely have:

- Change in metabolism
- Significant health issues

The fourth annual Association for Pet Obesity Prevention National Pet Obesity Awareness Day Study found approximately 53% of cats and 55% of dogs are obese or overweight.

The average life span of indoor cats is about 14 years – though this is reduced to 4 years in cats that are allowed to roam free, exposing themselves to the hazards of outdoor life

- Cars
- Stray Dogs
- Anti Freeze
- Wildlife
- Cold weather/Car hoods
- Cytotoxicosis
- Human Cruelty: Shooting, cat napping
- Infectious disease

"The truth is life may be more exhilarating for cats outdoors. However, as a veterinarian my job is to encourage safety and good health," Dr. Nicholas Dodman

Millions of indoor cats are likely clinically depressed. Doing nothing all day, every day is not normal." Dr. Karen Overall

Advantages of socialization classes for kittens

Kitty classes saves lives!

- Cats must be vet checked before enrolling – support, in fact, of twice a year visits 20
- They are desensitized to the carrier
- Desensitized to travel
- Desensitized to strange people, species (canines)
- Learn about proper care – which may enhance health, such as clipping nails, brushing their coats and brushing teeth
- Prevent behavior problems, before they occur
- Understand what is normal cat behavior
- Subtle Signs of Illness
- Feline Heartworm
- Provides a resource should problems occur later

To boost confidence, and just plain fun for kittens and for people “Having an activated prey drive is a requirement for all cats,” Pam Johnson-Bennett

This is ‘normal’ feline behavior -

Importance of carrier desensitization/transport

Behavioral/environmental enrichment

- Alleviate boredom
- Brain exercise
- Exercise / Burning calories
- Prevent behavior problems
- Assist in dealing with behavior problems if they do occur
- Enjoyment / fun
- Slows onset cognitive changes

A clear link between lack of enrichment and stress, various health problems in cats including cystitis.

A link between stress and health –

A link between offering all this to your cat and enhancing the bond

Every house should have

- High places where cat is allowed
- Scratching post
- Window ledge (not only high – but view outdoors)
- A cozy place (a box, tunnel)
- Room with a view, place(s) to watch the outside world

Enrichment needs evolved as cats age

Toy story

- Rotate toys
- Understand the kind of toys your cat likes
- Re-define toys – an empty box can be a toy
- More ideas: Empty box, bottle caps, corks, aluminum foil ball, walnut in bathtub, ping pong ball.
- Novel snacks, particularly in the summer a frozen treat (catsicle)
- Once a day with an interactive toy (with fabric, feathers, Cat Dancer) – that’s the stress busting prescription –
- Feliway, catnip, valerian root, etc.
- Laser light (pro’s and con’s)
- Various other toys, balls, mice toys, etc.
- Food Games – feed from Play’n Treat Balls, Scent Games
- Cats are not Anti-Social, Aloof: In fact, they are social
- Other furry friends...¼ of cat owners have a dog; ¼ of dog owners have a cat ...living with another cat, or another pet.

Training cats: A cat’s mind is a terrible thing to waste

- Harness Training
- Tricks
- Agility

If a cat goes outdoors – protected – great...but then –for certain, protection also against parasites: Heartworm, flea protection.

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