

Feline fabulous

Robert Holmes

ABSTRACT

Techniques for enriching the daily environment of cats that are confined all or most of the 24-hour period are described. By providing cats with greater environmental interaction the chances of frustration because of confinement will be reduced. This is expected to protect their welfare and reduce the chances of behaviour that is unacceptable to owners and neighbours.

INTRODUCTION

Wild-living cats on a daily basis are likely to: hunt and kill; travel to drinking places; experience weather changes and seek shelter from climate extremes; interact with adjacent animals; urine-mark their territorial boundaries; and interact with any other members of their group if they have one. Although cats are more likely than dogs to lead a solitary lifestyle, they also show signs that are suggestive of boredom.

As an animal behaviourist in private veterinary practice I see cats where the frustration of confinement appears to contribute to the behaviour problem or problems. Generally these animals are more reactive than usual to minor stimuli. It is considered that cats that are bored may be aggressive to people, destructive, chase their tails, eat fabric and remove their hair. There are other predisposing factors for these behaviours which need to be differentiated from the frustration of confinement.

Factors which are considered to increase the likelihood of a cat experiencing boredom include: youth, a genetically inherited tendency for activity, being male with testes, being female about the time of oestrus, confinement, lack of hunting, absence of feline or other companionship for a social cat, lack of a den, hunger and pain.

I encourage the owners of bored cats to carry out as much as possible of a program of environmental enrichment each day. The aim is to provide the dog or cat with sufficient complexity, unpredictability and choice in daily activities that are within the normal range of its wild-living counterparts (Chamove 1989). When it is in a comfort zone of stimulation and activity, the argument goes, it is less likely to behave in an unusually reactive way (Holmes 1993). Feedback from clients about this program has given me confidence that it has a place in practice. A few dogs and cats have shown greater reactivity in the first few days of the program before settling down to a basal activity state lower than that before the program started.

PROGRAM

Environmental enrichment is particularly important for cats that are confined for some or all of the 24-hour period. However some of these activities are applicable to cats that are allowed to roam freely. Some activities involve the owner in active participation, whilst 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.

These suggestions are for normal healthy cats and should be discussed with the owner's veterinarian to make sure they are appropriate for the cat.

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 practised 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 doing 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 handheld 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. Quite a few owners admit to playing and really enjoying hide-and-seek with their cats.

Feeding

We can make feeding more natural by getting the cat to search for food and by providing it in a form that needs chewing.

If you feed dried food you could put it in small clumps on the floor progressively further away from the bowl each day. The clumps can eventually be scattered throughout the house or outside in a courtyard in different places each day so that your cat has to search them out.

The food in the bowl can be made harder to eat. Whole raw chicken wings, corn cobs and a large cube of tough meat require more chewing than dried or canned food. This also improves dental hygiene by rubbing off some of the plaque that builds up all the time on the teeth and can result in bad breath and tooth loss.

Cats like a change to their diet - as long as it is highly palatable! They have even been known to eat things we would expect to be less palatable such as bread, pasta, raw vegetables and curry. It is amazing what they will eat when it comes from the hand of someone they like. You can take advantage of this to do some training.

Training

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 behaviour, it has been learnt. It's amazing what will be learnt when you are hungry and your behaviour results in food being given.

Cats can easily be taught to come, sit, stay, lie down, and retrieve. Reward the desired behaviour immediately 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 randomised in order and times of day they are given. Such a training session, particularly when it contains 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 be 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 into 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 placed between beams.

Indoor 'tree'

A convenient way of cats getting access to high points is up a tall scratching post that they can climb as though it were a tree. Covering this with cut-pile carpet will aid grip. If the cat cannot climb, for instance if it has no front claws, 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 35x30x25 cm 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 favourite 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 naturally scratch surfaces they can drag their claws through. This is very likely when they get up from a sleep and stretch. They tend to reach up a vertical surface with their forefeet and drag their claws several times through the surface. It can also be done horizontally and at other times.

Cats can be trained to use a scratching post and not to use other surfaces for these 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 60 cm 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 whilst it is scratching and food when it has finished, it usually quickly learns to exclusively use an attractive post.

As cats tend to stretch and scratch after a rest, the post is best placed close to the cat's most frequently used sleeping area. You may find it helps to have a scratching post in each room in which there is scratching.

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.

If scratching occurs on an unacceptable object then it 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 just as a kitten is trained for using the post. When it is using it consistently then move it less than a foot each day towards an acceptable position.

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 cats nails or by gluing rounded plastic tips over the ends of the nails.

There are different attitudes to de-clawing cats to stop scratching problems. Whilst it is commonly done in the USA and Canada it is very rarely seen in Australia, New Zealand and Great Britain. 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 unless the only other option is euthanasia.

Paper bags and boxes

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

Entertainment box

Taking advantage of their well-known 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 centres are commercially available.

Cat nip, 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 cat nip plant each day to sniff, rub, grasp, roll alongside and kick at it. This seems to be play and is shown by both sexes of reproductive age whether or not they have been desexed. Cat mint 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 confined in a transport box in a car. They can be trained to walk on a lead by reinforcing the walking forward with tiny pieces of favourite 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 restrict 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 configuration to suit and the possibility of expansion in the future 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 on 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 chance of a pair getting on. 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 if all the cats are desexed females compared to having one or more desexed 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; and with drugs.

CONCLUSION

More dogs and cats would successfully adapt to confinement and therefore show less undesirable behaviour if they were provided with greater opportunities to interact more with their environment. Although a number require greater owner time, some of these activities can be built into the physical design of the cats' or dogs' area of confinement or provided by changes in daily management. For the welfare of the animals, and all people coming into contact with them, I suggest these activities be encouraged for all confined dogs and cats.

FURTHER READING

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