

The Cat Friendly Home - Vicky Halls VN - talk given at the FAB Conference 2004

Cats with free access to outdoors will potentially have a full and natural lifestyle. The constantly changing outside world will provide all the mental and physical stimulation required to keep the individual healthy, both physically and mentally.

However there are risks. There are approaching eight million cats in the UK and this poses a number of problems. There are increased risks from social antagonism and the spread of disease and parasites. Road traffic accidents are a significant threat to our pet cats – one in four die on the roads, often in the first year of their lives. There are also natural predators including foxes (comparatively rare) and other risks associated with free roaming, for example stealing and foul play. Cats are also free to leave home if they object to their environment, for example sharing with other cats, disruptive household etc. Many owners therefore make the decision to keep their cats exclusively indoors or provide restricted access to a garden. In these circumstances the owners have a particular responsibility to provide their cats with an appropriate environment at home.

A cat friendly home is essential for all cats, but particularly those:

- Kept exclusively indoors
- Confined due to ill health/injury/FIV status
- With restricted access outside
- Who go outside less because they are timid/agoraphobic
- Who go outside less because they are elderly
- With access to an outdoor pen

What is a cat friendly home?

A cat friendly home takes into consideration the needs of the cat as a very different species from our own. It provides an environment that is safe and stimulating. Most homes are not necessarily the ideal habitat for a domestic cat so provisions have to be made to cater for their specific needs.

How to enrich the home environment

The definition of environmental enrichment in this situation is “making provisions within a cat's confined environment that stimulate and challenge the individual and enable it to perform natural behaviour”.

Why do cats need environmental enrichment?

Living indoors almost automatically deprives a cat of the ability to behave naturally and experience the challenge and frustration that occurs in an outdoor lifestyle. Indoor cats will adapt to their environment but can fall victim to a number of physical or emotional problems associated with boredom and lack of activity. In the absence of the challenge of hunting, exploring and social contact cats will fill the void of activity with those that are readily available such as sleeping, grooming and eating. It is no coincidence that indoor cats develop physical problems associated with a sedentary lifestyle (e.g. urinary tract disease), over-grooming problems and eating disorders.

The cat friendly home

Safety

Whilst it is essential to stimulate and challenge cats within the home there is also a duty of care to keep them safe. There are many household appliances, features and products that could be potentially dangerous. It is important therefore to ‘risk assess’ the home on a regular basis to keep these dangers to a minimum. There is a happy medium however between overwhelming anxiety about all possible risks and a casual laxity. An owner's constant concern for the wellbeing and safety of his or her cat can cause it to develop a sense of helplessness and inability to function normally without the owner present. Equally, an irresponsible attitude to safety by the owner could lead to a tragic accident.

Risk assessment

- Kitchen appliances e.g. tumble dryer, cooker, kettle
- Household items, e.g. sewing box, breakable ornaments
- Household cleaning products, e.g. disinfectants
- Garden products, e.g. slug pellets
- Garage contents, e.g. wood preservative, anti-freeze
- Medication, eg. Paracetamol
- Toys e.g. plastic eyes/noses
- Poisonous houseplants
- Open windows on upper floors

Cat flaps

Whilst discussing safety it is worth mentioning the greatest challenge to the cat's perception of security in the home. If cats have any access outdoors it may be facilitated via a cat flap. Whilst this 'personal door' appears to provide the opportunity for cats to exercise freedom of choice about time spent outside it also has a more sinister implication. Cats often see the flap as a vulnerable point in the defences of their home where any invader could potentially gain access. This can lead to a state of constant vigilance and uneasiness and a definite compromise to the individual's sense of safety in the home. If the cat has restricted access outside or chooses to venture out only in the presence of the owner it may be preferable to dispense with the cat flap altogether.

Stimulation

Both owner and cat can get pleasure from environmental enrichment and social stimulation; it doesn't have to be a chore-based element of the owner/cat relationship. Many of the aspects can be fun for both parties!

The key to providing a cat friendly home is to understand the objects or provisions within it that the cat considers to be important. These 'resources' should be available in sufficient number and type to appeal to even the most discerning individual.

'Resources' within the home represent all those things that provide nourishment, entertainment, stimulation and security for the pet cat. These resources include:

- Food
- Water
- Vegetation e.g. source of grass
- High resting places
- Private areas
- Beds
- Litter trays
- Scratching posts
- Social contact
- Predatory play
- Toys
- Scent stimulation e.g. catnip, valerian
- Novel items
- Fresh Air

Here are some examples of provisions that should be made in the home, particularly for cats kept exclusively

indoors. Some of the essential provisions are often taken for granted but even these, such as food, can be offered in such a way that the cat is stimulated and entertained. There is no reason why these suggestions shouldn't apply to all pet cats, even those with free access to outdoors.

Food foraging

The predictable availability of food twice a day (or even ad lib) in a food bowl in the kitchen does not represent any kind of challenge whatsoever. Cats would naturally spend up to six hours a day hunting, foraging, stalking, catching and consuming prey. They would eat about ten mice a day, probably involving about thirty attempts at capture. The normal feeding regime for the average pet cat potentially leaves a void of five hours and fifty minutes that it would need to fill with other activities. The provision of interesting and stimulating challenges utilizing food is inevitably difficult with the tinned variety but the possibilities are endless if the owner is feeding a dry preparation. Cats should be able to obtain food a little and often. Dry food can be made available all over the house in various locations, both on high and ground level. (The cat will probably follow the owner around whilst he or she is secreting the food. It may therefore be necessary to shut the cat away or have airtight containers in various locations rather than one place where food is always stored.) Once the cat gets used to obtaining food in novel locations the acquisition can become more challenging, for example:

- Build cardboard pyramids of toilet roll or kitchen roll tubes and stick together to form a three-dimensional triangle. Place single pellets half way along each tube and allow the cat to obtain the food by using its paw.
- Place dry food inside small cardboard boxes with the lids slightly open to encourage the cat to knock the box over or remove the food with its paw.
- Place dry food inside cardboard egg boxes.
- Paper bags can provide interesting receptacles for food.
- Throw individual pellets of food for the cat to chase and eat (this works most effectively on a hard floor).
- Stick two yoghurt pots together to form a diamond shape. Place holes in the pots, approximately the size of a two pence coin, using a soldering iron (this will ensure the edges are not sharp). Attach a string through a hole in the top and hang about two or three feet off the ground. Place dry food inside and encourage the cat to tap and agitate the pots to obtain the food as it falls through the holes.

Water

The majority of owners always provide water in the same location as the food bowl. Cats naturally hunt for food and search for water on separate occasions to satisfy either hunger or thirst. The presence of water near the food can actually deter some cats from drinking sufficient fluid, particularly if they are on a dry diet. Finding water elsewhere can be extremely rewarding and there should be at least 'one water container per cat in the household plus one' in various locations away from food. Some cats object to the chemical smell from tap water so filtered or boiled water can be used. There are various ways to provide water including:

- Pet water fountains
- Feng shui water features
- Tumblers (many cats will drink from a glass by the bedside table!)

Vegetation

A source of grass is essential for the house cat to act as a natural emetic. This can be purchased as commercially available "kitty grass" or pots of grass and herbs can be grown specifically for this purpose.

High resting places

Cats are natural climbers and it is important that the home environment provides opportunities to rest and observe in high places. This will encourage essential exercise and is particularly important in a single storey home without stairs. Any high resting places provided should be located in such a position that the cat is able

to get down; it is always easier to climb up. Here are some suggestions for suitable locations:

- Tall scratching posts are available as modular units and they are often floor-to-ceiling structures. Many provide platforms and enclosures for resting and represent challenging climbing frames.
- Free standing cupboards and wardrobes have large areas where a cat can rest or hide in a high place. It may be necessary to place furniture nearby to give the cat a halfway platform for ease of access.
- Shelves can be constructed specifically for the cat's use. It is important to provide a non-slip surface as many wooden shelves are extremely slippery. Bookshelves and other shelving can also provide sanctuary if a small area is cleared for the cat's use. Keeping expensive breakable ornaments on shelves or mantelpieces is inadvisable!
- Securing a section of closed weave carpet to a wall represents a challenging climbing frame. This can be fixed by using double sided adhesive carpet tape and wooden batons at the top and bottom (secured with screws and rawlplugs).
- A heavy duty cardboard tube from the inside of a roll of carpet can be utilised indoors and covered with carpet (inside out).

Private places

Cats need 'time out' from owners and other cats in the group. These can be areas under the bed, inside cupboards or wardrobes, behind the sofa etc. A cat should never be disturbed whilst using a private area.

Beds

An assortment of beds should be provided in warm, sunny, quiet or communal areas. Cat beds can be expensive and rarely chosen by the average cat when they can choose an alternative such as the owner's bed, chairs, sofas or radiator hammocks.

Litter trays

One tray per cat plus one ideally should be placed in different discreet locations away from food. These can be covered or open but it is important that the areas represent a place of safety where the individual does not feel vulnerable. Fine grain litter substrate tends to be preferred. A regular cleaning regime is essential and polythene liners and litter deodorants can be unpleasant for some cats so should be avoided.

Scratching posts/areas

Cats need to scratch to maintain their claws and mark their territory. If provisions are not made for this then cats will scratch items of furniture. Scratching posts should be as tall as possible to allow the cat to scratch vertically at full stretch. Panels can be attached to walls at the appropriate height if space is at a premium. Some cats prefer to scratch horizontal surfaces so a variety of scratching areas should be provided.

Social contact

Many cats enjoy the company of their own species and sources of advice actively encourage owners to acquire more than one cat when keeping them indoors. However problems can arise when the individuals reach social maturity and find themselves competing for limited resources within a territory that is relatively small. These problems can potentially be minimised by providing sufficient resources in the home and keeping the appropriate number of cats for the size of property.

There is no formula for the recommended number of cats per square metre floor space but common sense should prevail. Keeping seven cats in a two-bedroom cottage is asking for trouble!

Townhouses also represent a uniquely challenging environment for cats with the narrow staircases leading to each floor becoming areas worthy of defence and conflict.

Social contact with humans is important but the level should vary according to the personality of the cat. An owner should ideally respond to the cat's approaches or desire to interact rather than chasing it round to initiate contact. This can be irritating or, at the worst, distressing for some cats. Predatory play, grooming and verbal communication represents important social contact between owner and cat and is often better received than 'kissing and cuddling'. Some cats enjoy the company of dogs and many will tease the family labrador mercilessly so it is important to remember that company can come in different forms!

Predatory play

Fishing rod toys are ideal to simulate the movement of prey. Those toys attached to fur or feathers are always popular. Every cat is an individual but most prefer something as close to the natural prey animal as possible. The toy should be agitated in front of the cat (not in a rhythmical swing but a random movement) to allow the cat to catch it from time to time. All toys of this kind should be kept in a cupboard out of reach when not being used.

Toys/games

Toys soon become predictable and boring if they are allowed to remain motionless in the same place all the time. Natural fur and feather of a similar size to prey animals or those impregnated with catnip are popular. These should be stored away and brought out from time to time to maintain their novelty. Small toys (like fur mice) can even be placed inside the food foraging receptacles. Many cats enjoy retrieval games and this can represent an opportunity for social contact as well as play.

Scent stimulation - catnip

Two-thirds of cats respond to the smell of catnip and this can potentially produce a temporary euphoric state. If it is used sparingly this can be a fun distraction. Catnip toys can easily be made at home and used to good advantage for ten minutes a day or every other day. Loose dry catnip is always more potent than sprays or treats.

Scent stimulation - valerian

This herb has a calming effect on cats and some respond extremely well to valerian tea bags. These can be offered dry to cats (remove any string or staples) and they will rub and roll on them, giving a similar response to catnip. Valerian tea bags can be placed into cardboard boxes or cardboard foraging tubes to encourage exploration with a good reward at the end.

Novel/challenging items

New items should be brought into the home on a regular basis to challenge the cat's sense of smell and desire to explore novel things. Wood, stone, plants, cardboard boxes, paper bags etc can be placed in various locations and left for the cat to decide how to explore and to what degree. It is important that the cat is regularly vaccinated and treated for parasites if items could potentially have been in contact with other cats outside. New items should also be of different textures. Stimulating the cat's senses is extremely important and this also includes novel sounds but beware playing loud music etc.; a cat's hearing is extremely sensitive and this could be distressing.

Fresh Air

Grills over windows will allow fresh air to enter the house. This alone will carry challenging smells from outside and be a focus of attention for the bored house cat.

Synthetic pheromones

Feline facial pheromones are important signals of familiarity and security secreted naturally from glands in the cat's face. A synthetic version of a part of these pheromones common to all domestic cats is available.

Feliway, manufactured by Ceva, can be purchased in spray and 'plug-in' Diffuser form. This can have a useful calming effect on cats when moving house, decorating, adding furniture, visiting the vet, introducing new cats etc. The presence of a Diffuser can relax a cat sufficiently to promote play and relaxation. It is important not to rely too heavily on the presence of Feliway if a cat becomes anxious. There is an underlying cause for this emotion that should be investigated.

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The ways that an environment can be enriched for a cat are many and varied based on the principles described about; owners are limited only by their imagination. An understanding of the provisions necessary for a cat friendly home will ensure that our pet cats remain as happy and healthy as possible.

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