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ADVICE SHEET 15

Environmental Enrichment Games for Cats

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Introduction

It is important to provide your cat with fun, interest and both mental and physical stimulation, especially if your cat spends most or all of her time confined indoors. But environmental enrichment is not just necessary for indoor cats. Even cats that are allowed outside may not get all the stimulation they need and factors such as bad weather may make your cat want to spend more time indoors than out.



Play

Even adult cats need to play. Play is both hunting practice and a way of using intrinsic skills. So it is necessary especially if the cat has limited or no other outlet for these natural behaviours. Depriving your cat of toys or other ways of practicing hunting skills will not reduce her desire to hunt. But it could result in frustration and the emergence of behaviour problems.

Cat owners often say that their cat doesn't seem very interested in play, or gets bored quickly. But it is normal for adult cats to play for only very short periods of time and then wander off and find something else to do, such as have a nap. Also part of play for a cat is to retreat from the toy and just watch it. This doesn't mean that the cat has lost interest. What the cat is actually doing is practicing

the predatory skill of backing off and observing the prey until she feels that it is the right time to pounce!

Cats can be stimulated to play by movement and it can be very tempting, especially with a cute kitten to encourage play by wiggling your fingers or toes for the kitten to 'play with'. However it is important to remember that play is a means of practicing hunting skills and that means the use of teeth and claws! Therefore your cat or kitten should always be encouraged to play with toys and not with feet or fingers.

Toys

Motorised Toys: These are usually battery operated and move or have an attachment that moves in a way that mimics prey such as mice or birds. Their main advantage is that apart from switching it on they

require no effort on the part of the owner. But there are disadvantages:

- They can be quite costly in relation to other cat toys
- The risk of injury to your cat is slight but even so it is not advisable to use them when the cat cannot be supervised
- They are not so much fun when the batteries run down or if they break
- Some cats and kittens can actually be frightened of them

Bat and chase toys: A popular game for many cats is having a toy that can be batted with a paw and then chased. Whatever is provided for the cat must be lightweight enough that it will move a reasonable distance when the cat hits it with a paw. A table tennis ball is ideal; but other things can also be used such as old wine corks, dried pasta, walnuts, balls of crunched

up paper, cotton reels..... in fact anything that is lightweight enough that it can be made to move easily and is safe for your cat or kitten (i.e. it does not have sharp edges or could be easily swallowed).

Wand Toys: Sometimes called 'fishing rod toys' these usually comprise of a stick, or 'wand' to which is attached a long string, sometimes elasticated, with a toy at the end. Or in some cases the 'string' itself is the toy, which can be made to 'wiggle' and 'slither' along like a snake. The big advantage of these toys is that even small movements of the stick results in much larger movements of the toy.



Other 'Fun' Things



- **Cardboard boxes.** A small to medium sized box, such as an old shoe box can be made into a great toy by simply cutting 2-4 holes approximately 5cm across in the lid and in each side. Drop a small toy or ping-pong ball in the box and put the lid back on. Your cat will

then have great fun batting the ball through the holes. Large boxes can also be great fun for a cat to hide in and jump in and out of.

- **Paper bags.** Great fun for a cat to 'attack', leap on and hide in. If you give your cat a large paper bag with handles either remove or cut through the handles first, so that she doesn't get her head stuck in them. And never allow your cat to play with plastic bags which can be very dangerous if your cat chews or becomes entangled in them.
- **Mats.** You can turn a mat or even a towel or blanket into a toy, by pushing a stick or something similar under the mat and moving it around. To your cat it will look like a mouse running around under the mat, which can be great fun for her to chase and pounce on.

Food Foraging

If we were not here to feed them cats would need to hunt for their food. Having food placed in a dish in front of them may be the easy option, but it can also be quite boring. It can be a lot more exciting and interesting for your cat if she has to 'work' for at least some of it.

The easiest way to get your cat to forage is to just scatter dried food over the floor for her to sniff out. You can also buy 'food balls' and 'puzzle feeders' for your cat. But a cheaper and often more rewarding option (for both you and your cat) is to make your own:

Homemade Puzzle and Treat Toys

- Seal up the ends of a cardboard toilet or kitchen roll inner, make a few holes in the tube and then pour in few treats and/or dried food.
- Stick cardboard toilet roll or kitchen paper inners together in a rough pyramid shape and place a few pieces of dry food or cat treats inside each tube.
- Punch 1-2 holes in the bottom of an old yoghurt pot, just large enough so that small pieces of food will fall out if the pot is shaken. Attach some string to the top and then tie to a door handle or somewhere similar so that it is just above your cat's head height.

To get the food your cat will need to hit the pot with her paws to get the treats to fall out.

- Cut a number of cardboard kitchen paper inners into varying lengths, each shorter than your cat's front legs. Then stick the tubes upright onto a base. Pour a little dry food into each tube.

Your cat will then need to use her paw to dig into each tube to get the food out.

To make each game as attractive as possible for your cat don't just add basic dried food to these foraging toys, but also add a few extra tasty treats. And don't put too much in each treat toy at one time.

Safety must always be of prime importance when making home-made toys, especially those that are designed to hold food for your cat. So make sure that you always use non-toxic sticky tape or glue and be sure that any glue is completely dry before use.