

## BEHAVIORAL ENRICHMENT FOR CATS

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While the basics of behavior and training (positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, positive punishment, and negative punishment) apply across species borders, when it comes to shelters, a cat is not a dog. Cats often receive less attention in shelters as their signs of stress are often less visible. When stressed they often choose social withdrawal and inhibition of behavior, as opposed to a dog which often responds to stress and environmental deprivation by assertive behaviors such as barking and jumping against the cage walls.

Whenever I visit a shelter for the first time, I walk by cages of cats that are new to the shelter, as well as cats that have been in the shelter for longer periods of time. Ninety-five percent of the shelters I visit have cats that are new(er) to the shelter and walking up to the front of the cage, rubbing against it, and attempting to interact with me. (Alternatively, there are also often new cats in the shelter who are extremely stressed and attempting to hide. These cats also need attention and care.) In general, cats that have been in the shelter for longer periods of time are much more likely to remain stationary in their enclosures and not interact with visitors. This further hinders their chances for adoption, as most people are looking to adopt a cat that shows interest in them. This article will focus upon enrichment tools and recommendations for cats that will improve their well-being.

Enrichment programs in cats should be focused upon 1) improving housing conditions to provide better feline welfare and 2) improving welfare, decrease behavioral deterioration, and increase adoptability.

### IMPROVING HOUSING CONDITIONS

All cats who enter the shelter should receive a behavioral assessment. While housing is a “basic” need that is often not considered with respect to behavioral enrichment, it is also a need which is not fulfilled in most shelters and therefore must be addressed. Similar to dogs, this assessment guides us in placement decisions and helps to optimize our plan for improved welfare. For example, a cat that spends all its time hiding is better off being enrolled in a reading program than a clicker training program. Recommendations for humane cat housing are included in the previous article in this proceedings.

## ENRICHMENT PROGRAMS

While the planning and implementation of an enrichment program for cats is similar to dogs, the programs utilized must be focused on a cat’s behavioral needs. Examples of programs that may be most valuable for cats include:

- **“Quiet Time” Programs** – With these programs, volunteers are instructed to enter the enclosure (or sit outside the cage, for suboptimal housing conditions), make themselves comfortable, and ignore the cat. Volunteers can read from a book or magazine (sometimes reading aloud can help), but the primary purpose of this program is for highly stressed cats who are fearful of strangers and have primarily had negative interactions with people while in the shelter (via restraint for medical evaluations and blood draws, moving from cage to cage, etc.). Visits should last 10 to 30 minutes, and volunteers should record (in a log book) the cat’s behavior while they visited. Once the cat is regularly choosing to approach volunteers, volunteers can start gently extending a hand to determine whether the cat is interested in petting and rubbing against it. Alternatively, at this point in the program volunteers can start tossing treats toward the cat, as a stressed cat will not show interest in treats, a sign that the quiet time program needs more time, or that other treatment modalities should be considered to help that cat.
- **Feeding Enrichment Programs** – Because many cats are not as food-motivated as dogs, it is more challenging to institute a feeding enrichment program. Most stressed cats will have no interest in feeding enrichment. These programs work best for cats that are overweight (manipulating the food helps to expend calories!), and confident/active cats which need more mental stimulation. Food dispensing toys which work best for cats include empty yogurt containers with holes cut in the sides, or toilet paper rolls. With both toys, the cat must manipulate the item in an effort to obtain the food. Initially, volunteers must (often) teach the cat how to interact with the toy, by gently pushing the toy so that food falls out. Initially very palatable treats should be placed in the toy. Once the cat learns to enjoy the game, the shelter can start using dry cat food in the toy. Cats that are enrolled in a feeding enrichment program must be closely monitored to ensure that they are eating adequate amounts of food. Cats who are not interested in food will not benefit from a feeding enrichment programs; efforts should be focused upon treating any potential medical problems, and reducing their stress.