Environmental enrichment for indoor cats

Cats are highly intelligent, naturally curious and active creatures that we have chosen to take into our homes as pets. In order to respect the natural behavioral tendencies of the cat we are obligated to provide a suitably stimulating environment. The American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) encourages appropriate environmental enrichment (EE) to obtain and preserve optimal physical and mental health of our feline family members. Providing the proper environment increases the chances of living in harmony alongside these phenomenal creatures for years of enjoyment. Another positive effect of providing EE is a decreased number of surrendered/unwanted cats due to what may be undesired or perceived as inappropriate behavior(s).

Many behavioral and physical disorders that are seen in cats are often secondary to stress from lack of appropriate stimulation. Environmental enrichment should be part of the overall treatment plan for these disorders. As part of the wellness exam, it is the responsibility of the veterinarian to discuss the current state of the environment and to provide resources for EE to indoor-cat owners. It is well known that if an appropriate environment is not provided for indoor cats, they are at greater risk of stress-induced illnesses and conditions such as:

- Feline lower urinary tract disease.¹ ²
- Obesity.³
- Different forms of aggression.⁴
- Overgrooming and other compulsive disorders.⁵
- Upper respiratory infection.⁶ ⁷

In an attempt to prevent the above conditions, it should become routine for the veterinary team to inform owners of the importance of EE and to provide resources to owners. It is also important to consider EE in shelter cats for the same reasons.

To be successful with EE, there are several things that must be considered. If the owner is already experiencing what they regard as behavioral problems, a thorough medical evaluation should be performed. Once any medical conditions have been ruled out, properly identified and/or addressed, then one can move forward with an EE plan.

In order to design and implement an appropriate EE plan for an individual, the following should be determined:

- The life stage of the cat(s).⁸
- The degree of socialization of the individual(s).⁹
- If any medical conditions exist and, if so, the limitations/challenges of the particular condition(s).
- Whether the cat reacts to a situation in an active or passive manner.²
- Whether the cat is frustrated, fearful, or anxious.²
- If any undesired behavior is a natural or a reactive behavior.²
- It is imperative to prevent stress in multiple cat households by providing multiple sets of essential resources.

Such resources would include but not necessarily be limited to:

- Food.
- Water.
- Litterboxes.
- Toys.
- ‘Safe’ places.
- Vertical space.

References