Enrichment for Cats in Shelters: What the Heck Does That Actually Mean? Part Two of the Shelter Cat Series

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We are moving ever further away from those dark days of sheltering in which a cat was considered lucky to make it to the adoption floor at all, let alone have his mental and emotional needs addressed. The new millennium brings greater understanding and acceptance that all parts of a being’s existence are important for health and wellbeing, a concept that must not be ignored, especially in the sheltering world. Negative mental and physical stress are inextricably intertwined with behavior issues and illness in confined cats, which means a penny or minute saved through poor planning WILL actually cost you (and the cats) far more in the end.

Enrichment and mental stimulation are hot buzz words that have made the commute from zoo industries to the companion animal field. Unfortunately, many people are not really sure what those terms mean, for there is a lack of clarity surrounding the implementation of appropriate enrichment methods for home and shelter environments. The solution: change your mindset from “enrich” or “stimulate” to “What are the natural tendencies of domestic cats, and how can we provide options to satisfy those needs?” In part one of the Shelter Cat Series (“Set Up Cats in the Shelter for Success,” The APDT Chronicle of the Dog, Spring 2013), you learned how to provide cats with a habitat that supports their ethological needs on a species-wide level, while modifying components to suit each individual cat’s preferences. In this article you will learn even more about environmental adjustments that contribute to the mental, emotional and physical welfare of captive cats. Jump in and gain a deeper understanding of the whole cat!

The Wild in the Domestic Cat

In general, we are less likely to forget that the wild ancestor lies close to the surface in our pet cats than we are to be stunned when Fifi the dog murders a squirrel in cold blood. However, considering the rampant cat obesity problem¹ and the large number of cats surrendered because of their behavior²,³,⁴, many cat guardians are obviously falling short on fulfilling our obligation to this wild side of our pet cats. A copious quantity of freely available kibble in a bowl is directly antithetical to the natural environment and feeding strategy of the domestic cat. Here is the one sentence wrap-up: Cats are socially flexible predators with highly sensitive sensory capabilities who require, as we all do, some sense of control over their lives.

Free-roaming cats spend a large proportion of their day engaged in predation-type behavior. Activities such as finding, stalking, chasing, and killing prey can consume many hours a day, require substantial expenditures of energy, and engage both the mental and physical abilities of the cat. Additionally, the natural world provides daily variation and novelty while generally allowing each cat control over his or her level of engagement. For example, every day may provide a new crop of tasty lizards scurrying about in changeable patterns that engage all of a cat’s senses and abilities during the hunt. Then one day an aberrantly large lizard with huge fangs shows up! The cat has an opportunity to engage, observe this new development from the safety of a large tree, round up a posse of his boys, flee the monster, or one of many other choices — choices that are often absent or severely limited within the confines of the average house or animal shelter. Hopefully, large-fanged lizards aren’t running amok in your house tormenting your cat, but many seemingly benign occurrences ARE distressing to cats in general, and confined cats with little choice or control in particular.

Mission: Set Up Opportunities

With the mindset of providing opportunities for cats to engage in their natural behaviors, through means agreeable to the humans around them, you will be able to appropriately supply enriching activities for cats in your care. Some areas that are easiest to start with also pay off the most!

- Predatory behavior
- Play behavior
- Miscellaneous mental and physical engagement
- Social interaction

Many activities can be implemented in a variety of ways with whatever level of financial outlay you can manage, limited only by your creativity. Best of all, many activities will engage multiple types of natural cat behavior and can be quite entertaining for humans to watch!

Let Your Cat’s Inner Hunter Free

Predation is a top occupation for wild and domestic cats (Read a great info sheet about zoo cats and pet cats here: www.fabcats.org/behaviour/understanding/zoo%20cats.html). They are frequently actively engaged in one of the many facets of hunting, developing and honing their skills for future predation, or resting up for the next predacious opportunity. We can guide their
inner hunter to expend mental and physical energy on locating, stalking, “killing,” and eating in a manner fairly compatible with our human habitats.

**Get Rid of the Food Bowl!**

**Why?** Zoo professionals realized long ago that all species NEED to engage in a variety of foraging-type behaviors for physical and mental wellbeing. Many veterinarians and behavior professionals now recognize that free food is just as detrimental to our domestic cats as it is to other captive animals. Feeding your cat from a bowl may also cause him to suffer from a common condition affectionately known as *whisker stress*. (Check out this insightful blog by Amy C. Martin to learn more: http://consciouscompanion.com/2013/01/10/whisker-stress/)

**How?** Divide daily food amounts into multiple portions. Hide some of those portions throughout the cat’s allowed areas. If you feed moist foods, you can dab a few bites of food on various container lids, plates or washable toys for easy clean up. This can also be used in a shelter by hiding food in changeable locations around the kennel or group room. Obviously, make modifications as needed based on the health, nutritional needs and skills of each cat. A portion of the daily food or yummy snacks can also be used during behavior modification and training sessions (see Photo 1). Many shelters are completely wasting this powerful conditioning tool by providing free food with no thought to the delivery and without being contingent on a specific response from the cat. Stay tuned for the next article in our series to learn about training cats in a shelter!

**Puzzle Food Toys**

**Why?** Puzzle toys are the must-have for every intelligent cat owner or animal shelter! They can get our fat cats moving and provide an outlet for the more energetic *cat* athletes out there. Puzzle toys can be tailored to various mental and physical abilities, so all cats can participate.

**How?** Anything that requires a bit of manipulation to get food out is a food puzzle toy (see Photo 2). For example, a small plastic container with sliding drawers, a variety of small boxes, or PVC-type tubing can all stand up to some moist food and a determined cat, without occupying much space. Dry kibble or chunky dehydrated-style food can be put in pretty much any non-toxic container for an instant challenge. Or, if you are not the do-it-yourself type, multiple toy companies offer shelters a discount or freebies. In addition, manufacturers have finally caught on to the profitability available in the cat sector and are producing ever more interesting puzzle toys that are specifically for cats.

**APPROPRIATE Sensory Engagement**

**Why?** Predation employs all of a cat’s senses! Acoustic cues, such as high-pitched rodent vocalizations or rustling leaves, play an important role in locating prey. Olfactory cues can lead a cat to a tasty critter whose movement initiates a stalk-and-pounce session. Visual scenes are some of the easiest for humans to understand and manipulate, if we just pay attention to the cat’s point of view. Cats are attuned to even miniscule movements in order to successfully locate and capture their prey. Their tactile senses are also extremely attuned to movement of captured prey in their mouths or under their paws, atmospheric changes, temperature and other elements of their environment. This highly developed sensory system can be tapped for enrichment or, conversely, if overloaded, can contribute to an extremely stressed out kitty. Shelters can be particularly overwhelming with all of the cleaning chemicals, other animals, PA systems, clanging kennel doors and no way for the cat to control his or her level of exposure.

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How? First, evaluate your shelter set-up and implement any changes necessary to reduce negative sensory overload (again, see part one of this series for starting tips and resources). Then, provide opportunities for the cats to interact with interesting and novel items that are safe for them to investigate. Consult with your veterinary staff for safety and infection control considerations and modify items for safety by removing any small or loose parts, staples, strings, and so on. Always ensure the item does not cause the cat distress and yield to the cat’s choice about interacting.

Variation is important! Examine the resources available to each cat and introduce items that provide contrasting or novel elements. For example, if the kennel has a tile floor, dab a TINY bit of diluted vanilla oil on the bottom of a carpeted rug and place it in the kennel. You can then vary the rug textures, the scent, the location of the rug or the scent, and so on. Tea bags, such as valerian, can be a fun scent for Kitty to search out and rub or roll on. Some shelters have a rule against any catnip but I prefer a controlled dispensing program. Some cats love to roll around on it, eat it, chomp the toy a bit and then take a nice nap. Others prefer a wild zoom-about before their nap. Obviously the zoom-about is not possible if the cat is in a small cage rather than a large free-roaming room. It is worth it to find workable options because catnip can be a wonderful stress reducer and enticement to engage in a play session. For example, one shelter I have worked with takes one cat at a time into the spacious adoption viewing room for enrichment sessions. They can climb, look out the window, play with catnip toys and run around until they are ready for sleepy-time back in their kennels.

Call up your creative side to provide sensory entertainment! Place a larger rough textured tile on the floor for the cat to roll around on. Choose dry or dehydrated meat foods with a bit of a scent and hide them under the rug or a towel for the cat to find. Place leaves, soil, twigs and other natural artifacts into various containers with vent holes and place them in the kennel. Or you can even sprinkle interesting sand or dirt directly on the kennel floor or the litterbox. Providing kitty grass (see Photo 3) is another easy way to activate sensory exploration and provide an interesting element to the shelter kennels. Experiment with auditory enrichment by playing different styles of music, nature sounds, and providing items that have a sound element. Pay close attention to the effect of any auditory enrichment items because this is an easy area to overdo, especially in a shelter situation.

Movement

Why? Remember that prey movement plays a large role in predation behavior. During a hunting expedition, the cat may run, climb, pounce, leap in the air, reach into burrows, and perform a challenging mixture of acrobatic feats. Compare this to the physical and mental non-challenge of walking over to a food bowl and you will get an idea of why confined cats can display any number of behavior and health-related issues.

How? Movement can be a bit harder to implement due to the logistical challenges of, well, making something move! Of course, humans can usually accomplish that task and most shelters do have a pool of volunteers to recruit from. The key is to develop an active volunteer program and encourage the participants to follow their interests in a manner of more value to the shelter, and therefore, the cats. I have visited many shelters and witnessed volunteers handing out handfuls (GASP!!!) of free treats (BLASPHEMY!!!) to the cats. Certainly not everyone is interested in learning to train shelter cats to offer themselves up for a blood draw, but there are plenty of other guided interactions these volunteers can enjoy. Providing movement for play and predatory activities is one option. For example, most of these volunteers are capable of wielding a wand toy, pulling a string around, or tossing a small ball around for the cats to chase. Obviously, safety and infection control matter here, so develop an appropriate plan and then provide the tools that set your volunteers up for successful follow-through. Teach volunteers how to evaluate each cat’s hunting-style preference, and encourage them to emulate prey with the toys (See http://indoorpet.osu.edu/cats/basicneeds/preypref/index.cfm for ideas).

One of my favorite movement-based games, the food toss, is easy for almost anyone to do and most cats really enjoy it. You simply toss food around and the cat chases it! (See Jazzy Cat play the game here: www.youtube.com/Photo 3: This kind of grass is legal in ALL states!
Many cats enjoy the game on tile or other hard surfaces where they can really hear the food hit and then slide around while they pursue the escapee. Do be careful to not let the cats hurt themselves, and set up the game in a way that avoids conflict between multiple individuals. The game can be adjusted for the size of the kennel or free-ranging room, the type of food, the physical ability of the cat and the human participants, or any other component you desire. The food toss game can also be combined with the interactive play described above by tossing out a snack after bouts of wand play.

There are options for motion-oriented activities even if you don’t have many spare humans around. A sun catching prism in a shelter window is a low-tech option that can provide fun interludes of light-chasing. There are battery operated toys (e.g., UnderCover Mouse, FrolicCat lasers, Fling-ama-string) that can be interesting for many cats (see Photo 4). You do need at least a few people to monitor them for safety, breakage and battery life. Additionally, these toys can prod some cats over into the undesirable realm of overstimulation, so be sure to consider which cats are best matched with which toy. For the super tech-savvy shelter, the possibilities are limitless! At least one shelter has set up ways in which people can play with shelter cats over the internet. This is still a new area so it will be interesting to see many creative innovations in the coming years.

Don’t Forget About Social Interaction

The animal sheltering world is so focused on spaying and neutering (for good reason) and getting the cats out of the shelter as fast as possible that longer-term problems related to early weaning are becoming prevalent. The early social experience occurring between approximately two and seven weeks of age is absolutely vital for kittens to learn about appropriate behavior with others through interactions with siblings, their mother, and any other cats in their social group. Unfortunately, many kittens are surrendered to a shelter, with or without siblings or a mom, during this sensitive period of development. Kittens brought in with a mother are often taken away from her as early as possible to facilitate spay or neuter and adoption of the whole family. This abrupt early weaning adds another distressing element to the cat’s shelter experience while being detrimental to the healthy social development of the kittens.

There are many ways to provide enrichment and guidance for kittens in the shelter by enlisting the help of well-adjusted adult cats. Think of it as a kitten mentorship program! Some adult cats are very tolerant and socially adept, and would love a job helping raise these wayward kids into responsible adults. Kittens can visit their mentor cat one or more at a time, make forays into a group of tolerant adults (see Photo 5), and even visit kittens from other litters for play sessions. One of my favorite success stories involves an adult cat named Sebastian who was having a very difficult time in the shelter. I decided to test him out with a newly arrived kitten and the result was stunning. He became a completely changed cat and went on to mentor many kittens before he found his new home. Of course he took one of his apprentice kittens with him too!

Positive exposure to different types of individuals is a great way to increase the social adroitness and adoptability of any kitten, while providing an important job for the mentor, so don’t leave out other species during your campaign for the perfect kitten coach (see Photo 6). Mentors can also help other adult cats by showing them humans are fun to play with, being touched feels good, and other concepts that may be foreign to more fearful
or anxious shelter cats. Besides, watching kittens romp around can provide endless entertainment to many of your shelter occupants, humans and non-humans alike! Remember to always supervise these interactive sessions and structure them in ways that do not distress the participants.

**Get Out There and Enrich Those Cats ( Appropriately)!**

Don’t be confused about enrichment and mental stimulation! Simply ask yourself: “What are the natural tendencies of domestic cats and how can we provide options to satisfy those needs?” This question will lead you to the solutions best for your shelter cats. Certainly, the ideas in this article require an investment of time, and some level of financial commitment, to initiate and maintain. However, they can greatly reduce the financial and time expenditures over the long term by reducing stress, illness, and behavior challenges while increasing adoption rates. Shouldn’t that be the whole point? Now go have some fun!

**References**


**Additional Resources**


Feline Obesity: An Epidemic of Fat Cats by Lisa A. Pierson, DVM: www.catinfo.org/?link=felineobesity

Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine Indoor Pet Initiative www.indoorpet.osu.edu/cats/

One of my favorite fashionable bowls to avoid whisker stress: www.modapet.com/store/index.cfm/category/1/moda.cfm

Pet Greens Garden: Super easy organic kitty greens that can be grown right in the bag! http://bellrockgrowers.com/garden.html

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