

Canine and Feline Enrichment in the Home and Kennel:

A Guide for Practitioners

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KEYWORDS

• Enrichment • Behavior • Welfare • Canine • Feline • Environment

KEY POINTS

- Enrichment of the home and kennel environments should aim to maximize quality of life.
- Ensure that the environment supports natural species-specific behaviors.
- Remember that the environment is both social and physical.
- Encourage owners, and staff at boarding or research facilities to consider social and physical enrichment of the environment as a priority.

INTRODUCTION

Definition of Enrichment

Enriching a captive animal's environment, whether the creature is captive in a zoo, a laboratory, or a home, should involve enhancing their quality of life by making life more rewarding and meaningful. This should be done in accordance with their natural behavioral needs so as to increase behavioral choices and encourage species-appropriate behavior.¹

Goals of Enrichment

The goals of enrichment are to enhance mental and physical development in young animals through the provision of a complex environment, and to ensure good welfare in adult animals by providing them with a complex environment that meets all their behavioral needs.

It is the role of the general veterinary practitioner to safeguard the welfare of animals and to ensure that the requirements of their 5 freedoms^{2,3} are met. In addition to the

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traditional veterinary role of safeguarding health and advising on appropriate nutrition, it is important for the veterinary practitioner to also consider their contribution to ensuring that animals have freedom from fear and distress and freedom to express their natural behavior. To this end, veterinarians need to engage with owners and with those caring for dogs and cats in boarding kennels or research facilities and in their own veterinary facilities to offer appropriate and practical advice regarding the issue of environmental enrichment. This term is perhaps more closely associated with zoos and other wild animal facilities but it is important to remember that our companion animal species also deserve to live in environments that enhance their quality of life and ensure good welfare.

CONSIDERING ENRICHMENT IN THE HOME ENVIRONMENT

When owners take on a pet, they may be prepared for the financial commitment in terms of veterinary care, food, and equipment, and may also have considered time input in terms of training, especially when they are taking on a dog. However, very few owners have seriously considered the possibility of adapting their household to meet the behavioral needs of their new family member and are at a loss to know what is important in terms of environmental enrichment. In order to better understand the environment that their pet requires they must first understand their species-specific requirements. This is of particular importance to cat owners, who have very little in common with their new pet in terms of social behavior and behavioral requirements. That does not mean that education of dog owners is not also important; in fact, better education regarding social interactions with dogs and their requirements in terms of play, exercise, and training would go a long way to preventing many of the behavioral problems encountered by the general veterinary practitioner.

MAKING A CAT-FRIENDLY HOME

Creating a cat-friendly home is a vital part of responsible ownership, but it is also a rewarding process and one that can be great fun for kitten owners at the start of their new relationship. It is also crucial that owners are educated regarding understanding of cat communication and body language so that they can accurately interpret signs of stress, relaxation, and pleasure in their cats. Providing an enriching home environment involves paying attention to the home itself but also needs to consider the outdoor environment immediately around the home.⁴ Cats have a fundamental requirement for a safe core zone within their environment to eat, sleep, and play.^{5,6} Within this core zone, provision of access to 3-dimensional (3D) space can help to provide for natural feline coping strategies of elevation and hiding (Figs. 1 and 2).⁷ Cats need to fill their time budget with normal feline behaviors, such as marking and hunting⁸; therefore, access to the outdoor environment is preferable wherever possible. When cats do need to be confined to the home, there is additional responsibility for owners to ensure that the indoor environment makes sufficient provision for the performance of normal feline behaviors.^{9,10} Confining cats primarily in an indoor environment is extremely challenging in terms of providing both appropriate mental and physical stimulation, and is not suitable for all cats. The domestic cat has descended from solitary wild cats and, although as a species they are highly flexible in terms of social organization^{6,11–13} and many individuals can adapt to group living, they are very sensitive to stress caused by social factors. Therefore, modifying the environment to ensure feelings of security is crucial, particularly in multicat households or in neighborhoods with high cat densities.^{4,14}

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