

Feline Behaviour

Enhancing the Lives of Indoor Cats



“Saffron,” photo by Allison Fagan, Kanata, Ont.

By Dr. Susan Little

There are many reasons why indoor living is the safest option for pet cats, including protection from trauma due to accidents, attacks from other animals and infectious diseases—but the indoor life can also bring boredom and stress, resulting in medical and behavioural problems, if owners do not take steps to provide an interesting environment. Think of your cat as an invited guest in your home and realize that certain preparations will make it feel welcome and happy.

First and foremost, it is important to understand your cat's physical, mental and emotional needs. Cats by nature are not herd or pack animals, as dogs are. Cats evolved instead as solitary hunters of small prey, spending much of their day in pursuit of their next meal. They also spend time establishing, marking and defending a territory. Overall, free-living cats lead busy lives.

Studies have estimated that 50 to 60 per cent of domestic cats now lead fully indoor lives, removing the necessity to find food and patrol territory, but not eliminating the daily need for stimulation and activity.

An indoor cat's physical needs are fairly obvious, including food, water and a litter box, but they also have certain mental and emotional needs. These include a place to scratch, a place to rest, a place to perch above the ground and some interaction with toys to mimic the hunting of prey. Above all, these types of needs call for an informed and understanding owner.

Scratching

Scratching is a natural feline activity. It helps cats exercise their muscles, shed the old outer layers of their claws and mark their territory with both scent-based and visual signs. It is such instinctive behaviour that even owners of declawed cats notice their pets going through the motions.

The urge to scratch varies from cat to cat, as does the preference of location and materials. Some cats prefer to scratch on horizontal surfaces, such as carpets and rugs, while others prefer vertical surfaces, such as upholstered furniture. Observe your cat's preferences and try to provide scratching posts that will meet them.

A scratching post should be sturdy so it will not fall over, tall enough so the cat can stretch upward to scratch and made of a material the cat likes. Posts should be placed next to an area where the cat already scratches, next to sleeping areas, near entrances to rooms and along routes to food and litter.

Resting

Resting areas and hiding places are very important to cats. They must be safe, secure and private areas, away from people and other animals, as cats need opportunities for privacy and quiet.

Provide a cat bed in a favoured sleeping spot. Many cats are willing to use a 'cat tent' or a cardboard box placed in a quiet spot for them. Some cats will find their own very secluded places for private time, such as under the bed in a spare room or in a closet.

Perching

Cats like to be high above the ground at times, as they are curious and vigilant creatures by nature. Sitting in a high place allows them to conduct surveillance of their environment, seeing, hearing and smelling what is going on from a safe distance.

Cats value vertical space in their environment as much as floor space and, indeed, make better use of it than people do. They may find their own high perch atop a bookcase, kitchen cupboards or a refrigerator. A spot near a window is especially desirable, since it allows the cat to see what is going on outside, particularly if there are birds in sight.

You can create a perch for your cat by clearing space on top of furniture or by purchasing a 'cat tower' or 'cat condo' and placing it near a window.

Playing

Almost all cats like to play, but some more than others. Play activities are very closely linked to hunting activities. Observe the types of games your cat likes to play the best. Some prefer to chase bird-like toys. Others prefer toys that mimic small animals, like mice. Each of these types can fulfill the instinctive need to stalk and pounce.



"Shelby," photo by Kathy Willis, Cochrane, Alta.



"Gus," photo by Anjo van Vark, Scarborough, Ont.

Indoor cats need daily stimulation and exercise or risk suffering boredom and stress.

Pet stores offer many types of cat toys, including those that dangle, move and/or make noise. Be sure to provide toys your cat can play with by itself, as well as toys that require your participation. Cats get bored easily, so keep a selection of toys you can rotate occasionally and replace promptly when worn out.

Always check new toys to be sure they are safe. In particular, look out for parts that could fall off and be swallowed. Low-tech items—including ping-pong balls, paper bags, cardboard boxes and

crumpled balls of paper—can be just as good as specialty toys.

Fun food

Since free-living cats spend a great part of every day hunting for food, you can provide stimulation when feeding your pet with a little invention. You can buy food puzzles or cat toys that allow the insertion of bits of food or treats. There are also special fountains that make drinking water more interesting and timed feeders, which allow you to vary

Unique new combo protects against common risks

Fleas, intestinal worms and heartworm are common threats to cats and dogs. More than just a nuisance, some of these pests can be passed to you and your family and some can lead to more serious health problems for your pet.

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advantage multi contains the active ingredient from Advantage – the flea protection that veterinarians and pet owners have trusted for years. advantage multi works on the outside to kill adult fleas fast, and works without fleas having to bite your pet.

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Most puppies are born with worms, and kittens are often infected from their mother's milk. Pets continue to pick up worms throughout their life, mostly from other pets. These intestinal worms can also be passed to you and your family. advantage multi removes more life stages of the most common worms that live in the intestines of cats and dogs.

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Heartworm is spread by mosquitoes that bite an infected animal and then a healthy, unprotected pet. Preventing heartworm is very important because treatment is costly and can be dangerous to pets. advantage multi contains effective heartworm prevention to protect dogs and cats on the inside from the risk of heartworm.

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File photo

Cats need resting areas that are safe, secure and private, away from people and other animals.

the times at which they will dispense food for your pet.

You can make your own food puzzle from a clean yogurt container with a lid. Cut a small hole in the side, making sure the edges of the hole are smooth. Put some dry cat food in the container and roll it along the floor. Your cat will soon learn it has to continually roll the container so the food will spill out, bit by bit.

You can also hide your cat's food in a number of locations around the house, instead of putting it all in one spot. There is much more entertainment for your cat in trying to find its food every day than in simply knowing the dish will always be in the kitchen in the same location. However, you may have to put your cat in a room briefly, so it cannot watch you hide the food each day.

Try hiding small amounts of dry food under a paper cup or a plate in various locations. Another option is an egg carton, so the food will have to be scooped bit by bit out of the wells.

Tricks

Another way to provide mental stimulation for your cat is to train it to do tricks. Many cats can readily be trained to fetch or perform other simple tricks, using either conventional training methods or clicker training.

Pet stores and bookstores carry books and videos to help you learn how to train your cat. Not only will this help your cat avoid boredom, but it also provides another way for owner and pet to interact and enjoy each other's company.

Socializing

It is also worthwhile to spend some time every day petting, brushing or simply sitting with your pet. Cats may be solitary hunters, but they are also social creatures that enjoy human company. They need to receive attention and interact with their owners. Studies have shown contact with pets helps make people healthier and calmer, so enjoy the experience! 🐾

Dr. Susan Little is an Ottawa-based veterinarian, board-certified in feline practice. For more information about enhancing life for indoor cats, she recommends Indoor Cat Initiative (www.nssvet.org/fici/index.php), The Cat Friendly Home (www.fabcats.org/cat_friendly_home.html) and the books Clicker Training for Cats by Karen Pryor, Cats for Dummies by Gina Spadafori et al, Felinestien: Pampering the Genius in Your Cat by Cindy Ribarich and Suzanne Delzio, The Cats' House by Bob Walker and Frances Mooney and Cats Into Everything by Bob Walker.