

Enrichment Protocol for Shelter Cats

Enrichment refers to providing mental, physical and social stimulation. Allowing animals to think, engage, explore and learn goes a long way to keeping them behaviorally healthy in the shelter.

Every shelter cat should be provided with some form of enrichment every day. Enrichment should not be considered “extra” that is done when there is time. Daily enrichment is part of the humane care of confined companion animals.

Environmental Enrichment

This type of enrichment involves modifying the environment so that it is more comfortable, provides more space, provides more choices, and is more stimulating.

Caged cats should be provided with an environment that includes a comfortable place to sleep, a hiding box, and a perch.



If your shelter uses traditional banks of stainless-steel cages, consider cutting portholes between units to provide the cats with more space. Providing the cats with two cages instead of one also separates their toilet area from their sleeping and eating area.

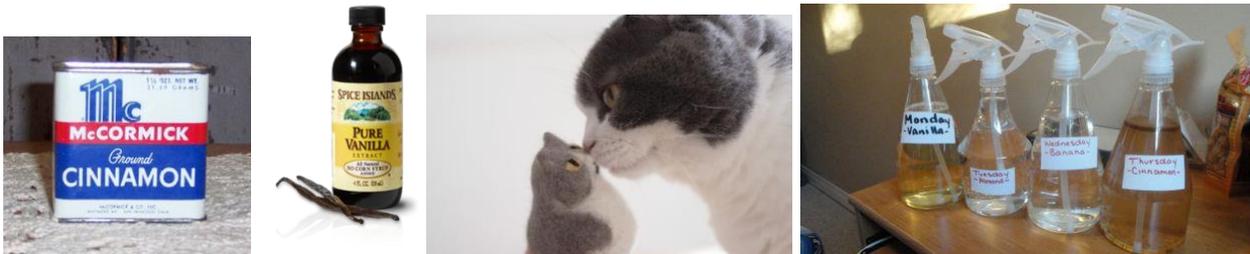


Sensory Enrichment

All of the cat's senses should be considered in your enrichment plan.

Olfactory Stimulation

Cats have an amazing sense of smell and this sense should be stimulated daily. A pinch of a dried spice (cinnamon, cumin, nutmeg, ginger) or a drop of a liquid extract (vanilla, almond, banana, etc.) can be placed on a cloth, piece of paper, or stuffed animal and placed in the cage. Additionally, liquid food extract diluted in water can be spritzed into the air. Be aware that cats find some scents (citrus, menthol, floral perfumes) offensive so do not use these scents.



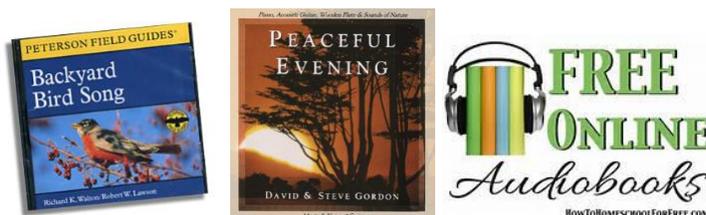
Having the cats use their amazing sense of smell to search for hidden treats in the environment is a great enrichment strategy. Remember – cats are hunters.

Provide a small pinch of dried or fresh catnip every few days. Only about 60% of cats have the receptors to be stimulated by catnip. Most cats get mellow after eating catnip, but if a cat gets overstimulated by the catnip – discontinue its use for that cat if he/she is housed in a small cage or in social housing. Silver vine is another stimulant for cats and even cats without the receptors for catnip enjoy silver vine.

Auditory Stimulation

Research shows that some forms of music can be calming to animals. Classical music, new age music, and music designed to calm the nervous system (Through A Cat's Ear) should be played at a low volume in the shelter during daytime hours (intermittent with periods of quiet). Recordings of books on tape can also be played. The sounds should be turned off at night because all animals require quietness to sleep.

Cats can also benefit from playing CD's of bird songs for a few minutes each day. The sound of birds is biologically significant to cats - meaning that they are hardwired to find the sounds intriguing.



Visual Stimulation

This sense is stimulated a lot in the shelter environment – in fact sometimes too much. Cats are often stressed by the sight of other cats, dogs, and even people and should have a place to hide if needed.

Because of their motion-sensitive vision, anything moving outside of their cage can pique their interest. Visually stimulating things can be placed outside cat cages such as televisions, perpetual motion toys, mobiles, fish tanks, or bird feeders outside a window. Something as simple as blowing bubbles for a few minutes or playing with a fishing pole type toy outside the cages will provide visual stimulation for all of the cats in the vicinity.



Tactile Stimulation

Many cats respond positively to tactile stimulation from humans (petting and brushing). Along with the tactile stimulation this enrichment also provides social interaction. Make sure to identify the kind of touch the cat appreciates and only pet him/her in that way on those body parts. Some cats are sensitive about being touched on certain parts of their bodies (such as the belly) so try not to irritate the cat with un-appreciated contact.

Taste Stimulation

Cats should be given novel food treats regularly to stimulate their taste buds.

Stimulating Species Typical Behavior

Scratching and rubbing are normal cat behaviors that we want to stimulate in the shelter. To do so, provide rubbing clothes and brushes and scratching boards in the cage and scratching posts in the playrooms, visiting rooms, and colony rooms.



Mental Stimulation

All animals need mental stimulation to stay behaviorally healthy in the shelter. Mental stimulation occurs during all of the above practices, but additional stimulation should be provided.

Food Gathering enrichment

Present food/treats inside a Kong, feeder ball, or empty container so that the cat must work to get them out. Any plastic container, paper bag, or cardboard tube/box can be used to make a puzzle feeder. PVC can be made into puzzle feeders as well.



Physical Stimulation

All animals require exercise to remain healthy. Cats should also be allowed out of their cages several times a week so they can run, jump, stretch, and play.

Play Stimulation

Play is the best way to keep animals in a positive frame of mind. Each cat should be provided with a play session at least several times a week and whenever he/she looks depressed.

Toys should be provided in their cages to stimulate self-play.

Social Stimulation

Cats should be provided with opportunities for social interaction with humans and other cats if appropriate.

When socially housed, observations should be made regularly to ensure that each cat is coping with the social environment. Some cats are too fearful of other cats to live in social housing and others may bully the other cats.

The colony rooms should contain multiple food bowls, water bowls, and litter boxes and they should be spread around the environment to ensure that the cats can always have access to them.

Efforts should be made to utilize the vertical space in the colony rooms so that there are plenty of resting areas and travel routes.