

Your Pet's Palace



How today's busy cat owner can provide the best environment to best suit the needs of a cat which has limited or no outdoor access

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Introduction and Assumptions

Although accepted as household pets, the behaviour of cats stems from their basic survival instincts and requirements in the wild as social but highly specialised predators. These centre on the need for food, shelter, security and mating.

In their natural environment, hunting for food involves chasing, climbing, catching and killing prey. Defending territories and determining social status involves confrontation. The behaviour of domestic cats mirrors that of their feral relations, and can appear hostile when performed in a house – however, the cat is only doing what comes naturally to them in order to satisfy their basic needs. The key to a good relationship between cats and their owners is to satisfy the needs of both parties and provide an acceptable environment for the cat to act in their own natural manner, while reducing their exposure to dangers and threats.

This essay addresses how these basic needs can be satisfied for household cats with limited, or no, outdoor access. Effectively, four key factors lead to a 'happy cat':

- Low stress (emotional and physiological – temperature, hunger, and an ability to cope with situations)
- Low anxiety (predictability – no uncertainty from unknown/imagined sources)
- Low fear (limited [or no] threats which cause distress)
- Sufficient physical and mental stimulation

Differing Personalities and Needs

All of the personal characteristics of the owner (age, gender, personality, lifestyle) determine the owner's attitude towards the cat. This, in turn, will affect the cat's behaviour. One of the key characteristics will be the working habits of the owner, and how much time they spend in the house and with the pets.

If the cat is not the only pet in the house, the pets should be introduced to each other in a controlled manner. A range of factors including the early socialisation and learning experiences all contribute to the cat's 'personality'. There are many books and sources of advice which can recommend how this should be controlled, although this is a topic beyond the scope of this essay.

Although cats have the ability to adapt their lifestyle to fit with that of their owners, it is essential to remember that for a happy household, each pet should be treated as an individual, and the requirements of all must be satisfied. Neglecting the needs of a single party could result in a cascading 'domino effect', threatening the stability between other members.



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The Living Quarters

The size and layout of the home require careful consideration – it should offer stimulation and variety, not confinement. As hunters, cats like to climb and explore. This should be permitted, with the homeowner adapting their lifestyle, taking careful consideration not to leave fragile or valuable objects in places where they may get damaged or destroyed. Prevention is better than cure; accidents such as vases being knocked over should be seen as the fault of the owner leaving an item in a risky location as opposed to blaming the pet for accidents caused during exploration and play. We must remember, would the cat understand the difference in cost between an expensive vase and a single leaf blowing in the garden? In addition, the homeowner should take careful consideration of the safety of the pet, and assess additional factors such as the location of dangerous objects (such as sharp knives, toxic plants, dangerous cleaning products, etc).

Owners can encourage cats towards a certain style of behaviour by providing new environments for them to explore and play with. As cats like to climb and hide inside things, the provision of items such as pet trees and boxes can help keep the cat entertained. These items can also satisfy the cat's desire to scratch, preventing the damage to furniture.

The environmental conditions within the living quarters are also of key importance to the health of the cat. Driven by basic needs, cats will typically find their own areas where they are warm or cool, as their bodies demand. The owner can assist by ensuring that there is access to a wide range of conditions, both light and dark, warm and cool, and also regular access to fresh air. This can be provided through open windows (which are screened or partially opened with child-locks), while some cats like safe fans and air humidifiers to provide a cool, fresh environment in summer when heat exhaustion can be extremely dangerous.

Feeding arrangements

Cats need regular access to a sufficient supply of food and water. In addition, the cat may like access to digestive aids such as indoor cat grass. As well as providing food and water in a favourite place, it may be appropriate to mimic the outdoors where food and water is not always found in the same location or together - and place a few discreet bowls of dried food and water around the house. Some cats like running water through a dripping tap or small water fountain.

Play and interaction

Play is essential in the lifelong development of cats, but especially so in the earlier years, to help aid and increase sociability. Owners must appreciate that cats are deadly opportunistic hunters, and their play will mimic this skill. Often, play will be instantaneous on sight of a spider, fly or toy.



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To keep the cat satisfied in the absence of live prey, alternatives should be provided. Leaving toys for the cat's amusement is not sufficient; regular stimulation is required with new and varied objects. A toy which has been laying static on the floor for a week is unlikely to stimulate a cat's hunting desire. The most appropriate objects will be those that mimic moving prey, for the cat to benefit from physical and mental stimulation, along with the 'satisfaction of the hunt'. The lack of access to an alternative target for a cat's natural behaviour can lead to behavioural problems.

Cats tend to enjoy three different types of play:

- **Self Play** includes all of the play-related actions not involving other humans or pets. This includes exploring, examining, and the seemingly random running and jumping that cats tend to do from time to time.
- **Object Play** requires the provision of items which interest the cat, including small toys such as string, balls and other items. A selection of toys which appear like prey (i.e. a similar size) are more likely to encourage a hunting action with close contact play, even to the stage of 'killing bites'.
- **Social Play** often takes place where there is more than one pet in the house, and involves play fighting and rolling around. This can also provide important interaction between the owner and pet, and can involve a degree of interactive object play – the owner can initiate object play, and use toys to mimic the actions of typical prey. Cats may play-fight with their owners in the absence of other play-mates. In this instance, encouraging object play can help ensure that aggression is directed towards the toy and not the owner.

Studies have found that the more the owner initiated the interaction, the less overall time the cat and owner spent together. Therefore, it is important to recognise that cats tend to prefer social play when they desire – the owner should respond to a cat's request for play (through their verbal or physical interaction). However, many cats with a reluctance to play can often be encouraged to do so with the right toys).

Toilet habits

The cat should be provided with a clean, private toilet place. Ideally, a suitably sized litter tray with an appropriate substrate will need to be provided in an area where the cat is likely to remain undisturbed. The substrate used should be cleaned regularly and completely replaced on occasion. There should also be sufficient litter for the cat to dig a hole, and cover excrement and urine, to hide scents.

Dealing with undesirable behaviour

A cat's natural behaviour can often be seen as undesirable by the less understanding owner. Dealing with such behaviour must be done in a careful, controlled manner if the owner wishes to influence the future behaviour of the cat and not cause distress.



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The detail is not the subject of this essay, but in note, it should be mentioned that cats tend not to accept domination, and punishment is not the best response or training aid. Methods such as classical conditioning, instrument learning and observational learning can make best use of positive and negative rewards (e.g. absence of reward / attention) as reinforcers.

Conclusions

In order to provide the best environment for a cat with limited or no outdoor access, the owner must consider the cat's view of life and desires, as well as their own. These needs and desires stem from a cat's basic needs and instincts, and will change with a number of factors such as the cat's age and surroundings – and as such, need to be re-evaluated on a regular basis.

Owners who accept their cat's individuality, while providing a secure environment, few (or no) sources of stress/anxiety/fear, and providing access to sources for food and mental/physical stimulation, are taking the best approach to building a good life-long relationship with their cat.



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