

## ARE YOU FULFILLING YOUR CATS DESIRES?

We generally assume that cats will be quite content living within a domestic environment as long as we provide them with their basic needs such as food, water and shelter. However, cats are complex creatures and as such have many more requirements for leading a full and happy life within the home. Many of their natural behaviours are unable to be expressed or inadvertently discouraged within the normal human domestic environment. In order for your cat to fulfil his normal desires, we need to take into account his natural behaviours and adapt his home environment and daily routines to provide suitable outlets for these behaviours.



## HUNTING



You may feel that because your cat is well fed he does not need to hunt. However, predatory activity is not dependent on the presence of hunger, such that a stimulating movement or noise can easily divert a cat even whilst they are eating a meal! It is a natural and necessary part of your cat's repertoire of behaviour, often exhibited by domestic cats for up to six hours per day.

In indoor cats especially, this aspect of their behaviour is often ignored leading to frustration and inappropriate expression of the behaviour e.g. the cat that attacks your leg or feet when you move suddenly.

A lack of opportunity to express this behaviour may also exacerbate other behaviour problems including conflict between cats in the home or anxiety disorders. Thus, this natural instinct must be catered for.

You can make provisions for predatory behaviour to be expressed by playing with your cat, without having to bring in wild prey!



**When to play:** Aim for those times that your cat naturally appears interested in play. When he is fast asleep on the sofa he is less likely to be interested than when he is sitting and watching the environment around him. Cats will often focus their hunting activities early in the morning and in the evening around dusk so aim to play with your cat at these times. Sessions can be varied in length depending on your cat's interest. Usually sessions of approximately 10 minutes in length in five separate sessions are adequate.

**What to play with:** Cats are motivated by smell, sound, texture, and movement. The toys you use should aim to cover all these aspects. Discover your cat's preferences by presenting a variety of different sized toys made of different materials and watch his reaction to gauge his preferences. Use toys that will move independently or that you keep moving at a distance such as fishing rod style toys. Cats also get bored easily, thus it is important to rotate toys to maintain their interest. Variety in "prey" can be provided by tying different toys onto the end of the string on a rod for different play sessions. For those cats that appear disinterested, incentive to play can be increased by attaching a tasty treat to the toy.



**How to play:** If you are holding the toy with your hand, then your cat will be aware of this and it will interfere with the full expression of their predatory behaviour as it does not seem “real”. Also it encourages them to “play” with your moving fingers- which is not quite so much fun when they decide to “play” with your hands at other times! Thus aim to play using remote toys. You should be at a distance and not directly interacting with your cat so they can concentrate on the job in hand. The easiest toy to maintain this position whilst continuing to move the “prey” are fishing style toys.

Use the rod to keep the object moving and let your cat stalk, chase and “kill” it repetitively in each play session.

Remember cats will often spend time observing the movement of potential “prey” without chasing it, this is also a part of the normal predatory sequence and should not be seen as a sign that your cat is not interested, rather he has become more efficient at waiting for the right moment to pounce!



## EXPLORATION

Although cats spend much of their day watching their surroundings, it is important that they are given the opportunity to explore varied environments to provide sufficient stimulation for them within the home and garden. This can be provided by giving access to different surfaces with varieties of textures such as stone, wood, carpeting, cork etc. Also stimulate him with different smells such as grass, catnip and imaginative planting. Plants can also provide for your cats other needs as long grasses and low lying shrubs are great to hide in and observe potential prey and trees provide ample opportunity for climbing behaviour.

## RESTING AREAS

Cats like to spend protracted periods of time observing their territory. To carry out this important part of their routine, they prefer to be in a safe place where they can watch everything but not be detected themselves. If they are not provided with these kinds of resting places within the home they can become distressed and choose to hide, often doing so away from the areas where you frequent, thus reducing your social contact with them.

To increase your cat's relaxation and encourage him to remain within busy areas of the house, aim to provide resting areas where he can remain hidden from view either partially or fully. These can be provided by using cardboard boxes, igloo style beds or houseplants. As well as these areas on the floor, similar areas should be provided at a height, using accessible shelves. These areas should have a good view for your cat so he can sit and watch the environment whilst remaining relaxed and sure of his safety.



## CLIMBING

Your cat will need to climb both to explore and also to gain access to safe high resting places. Provisions for climbing also provide physical activity and mental stimulation for cats within the home and garden.

Aim to provide multiple areas where your cat can climb to reach high resting areas using tree branches, activity centres, carpet covered poles or shelving placed on a stepwise process up the walls.

If possible aim to provide an area for your cat to climb in a full circle around the walls without touching the floor, an angle of 45-60degrees with 1.2-1.5m distances between jumps is known to be preferred.



## EATING

Wild cats will spend a large proportion of their day seeking, stalking and attempting to kill prey before ingesting small amounts and then repeating the process in order to acquire sufficient nutrition. In the domestic situation, this process is denied them when they receive food at specific times in their bowl, thus removing a valuable source of daily activity.

Aim to provide similar stimulation for your cat using food. Encourage him to “hunt” for it. This can be provided by using timer dishes that open in a variety of places at different times of the day containing special treats. Placing food in hiding places where you gradually increasing the difficulty of finding the food, encourages your cat to spend time searching for it during the day. Also use puzzle feeders which dispense one kibble at a time of your cats normal diet when rolled along the floor and scatter dry food in different areas around the house.

## DRINKING

Cats prefer to drink away from where they eat and will often enjoy drinking from standing water. Provide water for your cat in a well-lit area on route between where your cat eats and where he likes to sit and rest, preferably in an area where the surface he rests on, slopes downwards towards the bowl.

## SCRATCHING

Scratching is a normal behaviour you will often observe your cat performing or find evidence of on a daily basis. This activity has many functions including giving a visual and scent signal or “mark”. It is not possible to eliminate this natural behaviour; rather you should aim to direct it onto more suitable surfaces than your sofa by providing scratching posts in the locations and with surfaces that he prefers.

**How many?** Often cats prefer to scratch in multiple areas of the home, thus one scratching post or surface will not be sufficient for your cats needs.

**Location:** Aim to target several areas within the home. Watch your cat’s activities and where he spends time performing this behaviour to identify where he needs to perform this activity. Common places to scratch include near feeding and resting areas and along “busy” routes frequented by all the household cats e.g. the hallway, and close to entry and exit from the house. Although the classic cat-scratching pose is standing and stretching the front legs upwards before dragging them down, some cats will also scratch on horizontal surfaces. Thus assess your cat’s preferences and use scratching surfaces appropriately for them. With vertical posts ensure that the height is such that your cat can stretch full length and still maintain a grip on the surface.

**Materials:** this depends on your cat's preferences. He may prefer wood, carpet or soft material. Often cats are attracted to materials with vertical lines running down the material so select these for use or add your own vertical lines to the covering using a non-toxic permanent marker.

Remember, it is important that a visual signal remains when your cat scratches the area- thus do not replace them as soon as they have been damaged!

## OUTDOOR PENS

An outdoor pen can provide extra stimulation for your cat, without the risks of him straying onto a nearby busy road or becoming involved in physical conflict with other cats outside. Ideally when building a pen, the entrance should be easily accessible to your cat via a cat flap so he can come and go as he chooses.

Size of the pen is not as important as the environment within the space. When building a pen, aim to provide an interesting area for your cat- otherwise all your hard work will not be appreciated, an empty space will not encourage your cat to use the area in the same way that an empty room will be avoided! The area should take into account all the above requirements including a variety of feeding and drinking areas, suitable resting areas at different heights, different textures and surfaces to investigate and upon which to rest and observe his surroundings. Plant a variety of cat-safe non-toxic plants providing cover and texture with scent and visual stimulation. Also placing bird tables or baths out of reach but close to the pen can provide hours of visual stimulation for your cat without decimating the local bird population.

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