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Enriching the Shelter Cat; Group or Single Housing?

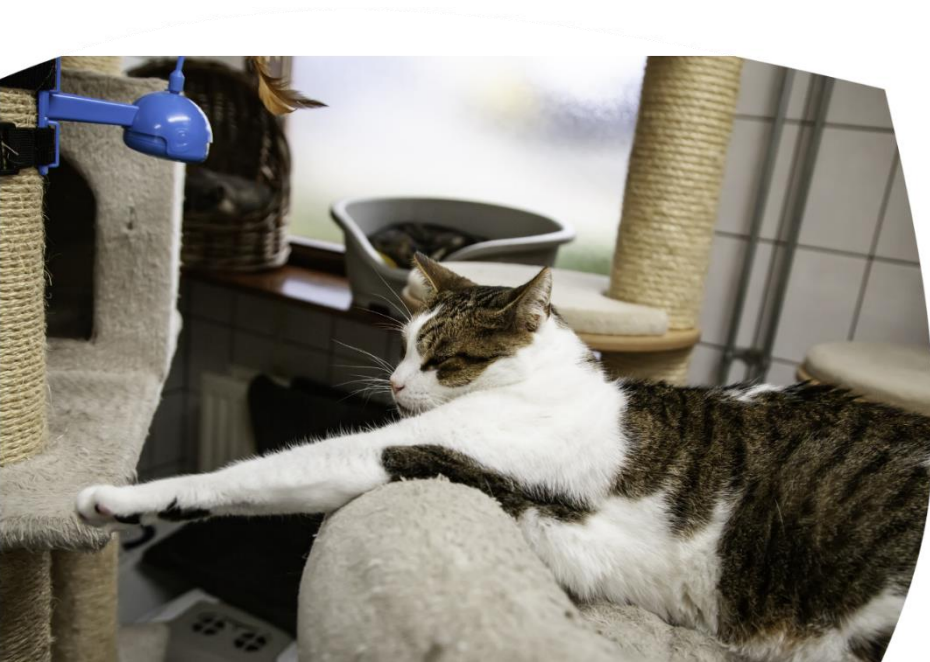
Dr Jenna Kiddie
Head of Canine Behaviour





- Providing an environment that meets the cat's species-specific needs
- Failing to do so leads to unacceptable living conditions





- Environmental optimization to meet species-specific and individual needs
- Introducing the five pillars of environmental health
- Single- and group-housed considerations

Considering the species



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Hunter/
prey

Solitary
survivor



Optimal
environment

Suboptimal environments



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Anticipate
threat

Avoidance

Pain/fear/
anxiety/
frustration

Behavioural
inhibition

Physiological
stress

Aggression



Five pillars of a healthy environment



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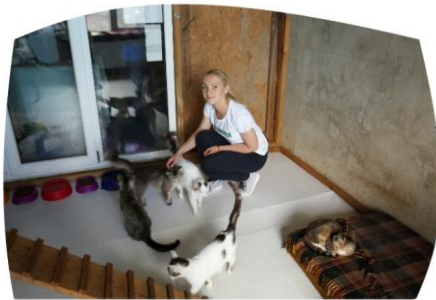
Safe place



Distributed resources



Play/predation



Predictable interactions



Scent maintenance

AAFP and ISFM Feline Environmental Needs Guidelines (2013)

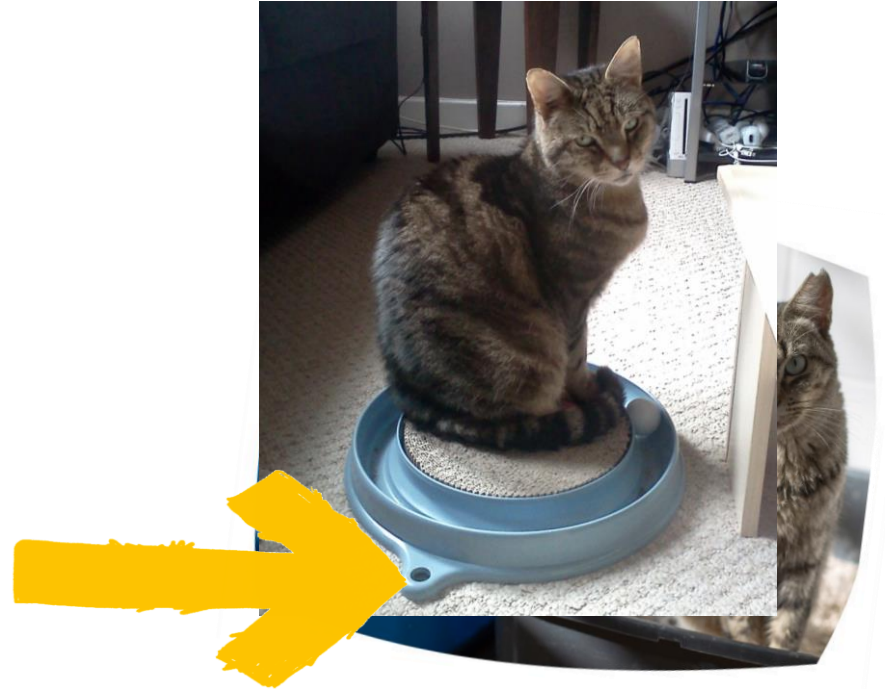
1. Providing a safe space



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- Private and secure
- Often raised
- Sense of enclosure, or seclusion

**A litter tray should
not substitute for a
bed**



1. Providing a safe space



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You can provide a second, empty litter tray for resting



1. Providing a safe space



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1. Providing a safe space



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Promote
investigative
behaviours



Positive welfare
and
additional
exercise



1. Providing a safe space - Considerations



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Multi-cat groups:

- large enough for one, but not two cats
- more than one entry/exit
- at least one per cat
- spaced out

Kittens and older cats

- ensure easy access

Avoid slippery surfaces

House separately from dogs

Easily cleaned



1. Providing a safe space - Considerations



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- housed separately from dogs
- easily cleaned and disinfected / disposable
- should allow monitoring
- cages should not face other cats' cages



2. Providing multiple, well-distributed key environmental resources



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Provide individual access
to avoid social tension



2. Considerations



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- Separate toileting area
- Individual feeding sites
- Sufficient separation of all resources to support each cat

One or two litter trays?



2. Considerations



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Separate cages?

3. Providing opportunities for play and predatory behaviour



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3. Shop bought feeders



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Predators – make
several hunting
attempts/day



Enable use of
motivated feeding
behaviours



3. Homemade feeders



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3. Introducing feeding enrichment



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- Continue offering food in usual bowl
- Adjust difficulty level of the puzzle feeder so that obtaining food is easy until cat learns how to use it
- Supervise cat to ensure the experience is stimulating and positive

3. Multi-cat group considerations



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- Meet all preferences
 - Have several types of puzzle feeders
- At least one puzzle feeder per cat
- Distribute widely around the cats' environment



3. Play



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- Favoured toys mimic prey:
 - Texture
 - Movement
- Rotation
- Catnip
- *laser pointers*



3. Object play



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3. Play - considerations



- Avoid social tension and competition in multi-cat groups
- Modify play for the individual
- Prevent injury
 - Supervise/remove
- Avoid toys that will disturb other cats



3. Visual stimulation



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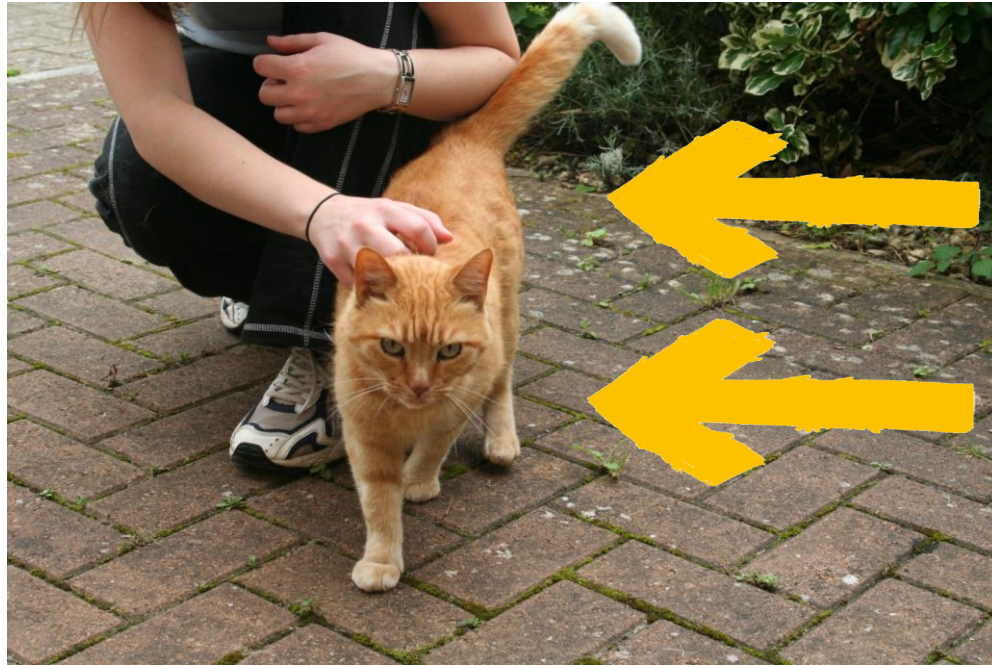


Frustration!?

4. Providing positive, consistent and predictable interactions



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Consent test

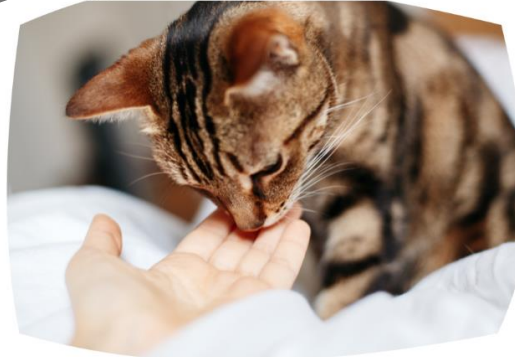


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Allow cat to
approach



Allow cat to
sniff hand first



Wait for cat to
engage again
- if they don't, leave
them alone



Stroke head/cheeks for
3 secs
(or until they walk away if
sooner)

4. Providing positive, consistent and predictable interactions - considerations



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- Learn cat's preferences, get to know their body language
- Give all cats uninterrupted attention in multi-cat groups
- Socialise and habituate young kittens
- Accommodate for changing preferences as the cat ages
- Any sudden changes should be checked by a vet



5. Providing an environment that respects the importance of the cat's sense of smell



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- Olfactory information involves many different smells detected by the nose and chemical information detected by the vomeronasal organ via the flehmen response



5. Providing an environment that respects the importance of the cat's sense of smell



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- Allow scent marking
- Avoid disrupting scent profiles, e.g. through cleaning
 - Spot cleaning will help maintain scent profiles
- Habituate kittens to novel scents
- Quarantine new items or rub them with cat's scent
- Synthetic feline pheromones can help reduce distress in a caged environment
- Enable continuity of scent when transferring cats between environments



5. Providing an environment that respects the importance of the cat's sense of smell



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- A cat returning to a multi-cat group may smell different
 - May disrupt the communal scent profile and inter-cat relationships
- Arrange routine veterinary visits for all cats at the same time
- Careful reintroduction following scent swapping





Presenting some challenge that is appropriate to an animal's natural ecology and matched to [their] skill level is likely to provide cognitive, physical and behavioral benefits.

(Dantas et al., 2016)

References



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- Dantas LMS *et al.* 2016. Food puzzles for cats: feeding for physical and emotional wellbeing. *Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery* **18**: 723-732
- Ellis SLH Carney HC, Heath S, *et al.* 2013. AAFP and ISFM Feline Environmental Needs Guidelines. *J Feline Med Surg* **15**(3):221
- Heath S. 2020 Environment and feline health: at home and in the clinic. *Vet Clin Small Anim* **50**: 663-693



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Thank you

