

Cat Enrichment: Toys, Puzzles, Aromatherapy and More



Providing for your cat's mental well-being is just as important as providing for her physical well-being. All animals, including pets, have natural behaviors and needs; to be healthy and happy, they must have opportunities to express those natural behaviors in appropriate ways. So, meeting your cat's mental and emotional needs helps her to lead a fulfilling life and have fewer behavior issues, and also allows you to forge a stronger bond with her.

How do you provide enrichment for your cat? There are a number of ways, such as giving her a variety of toys, providing perches, training and playing games with your cat, and much more.

Self-play toys for cats

Self-play toys are those that your cat can play with on her own. Toys that encourage chasing and pouncing are typically the most enjoyable for cats. Some simple and cheap options are cardboard boxes, large paper bags (with the handles removed for safety) and crumpled-up pieces of paper. Other options are catnip-filled toys, springs, and wall- or door-mounted toys. There are also several battery-operated toys on the market to provide your cat with plenty of entertainment when she's alone. Remember to watch her for a while after you give her a new toy, to make sure she is playing safely with it.

Food puzzles

Foraging toys (also called food puzzles, puzzle feeders and treat dispensers) help satisfy a cat's natural instinct to search for food. The basic principle is that you fill up the toy with dry kibble, wet food or treats, and the cat learns to manipulate the toy to release the food. Some toys are stationary, such as interactive puzzle feeders like the Trixie 5-in-1 Activity Center, and some are designed to move around, like the Kitty Kong. Other examples of purchased toys are Trixie Mad Scientist for Cats and Nina Ottosson cat puzzle toys. Another type of food-dispensing toy is Pavlov's Cat, which releases dry food when a cat scratches the toy.

You can also make your own food puzzles. There are numerous videos and articles on the internet showing how to make DIY cat toys or puzzle toys. One of the easiest DIY options is to "scatter feed": Simply toss your cat's kibble on the floor and let her eat up all the pieces. To provide more of a challenge, hide small piles of her kibble around the house and let her search for her meal.

Interactive toys

Interactive toys help strengthen the bond between you and your cat by letting you share fun and positive experiences. Both you and your cat can have a great time playing with

wand-type toys with strings, feathers and fabric strips attached. One popular product is the Cat Dancer, which can function as either a self-play or an interactive toy.

Some cats enjoy playing with laser pointers, chasing the point of light around the house. Make sure that your cat is eventually able to “catch” something while playing with the laser pointer; point it at a toy that your cat can then play with, so she doesn’t get too frustrated.

Low-cost (or no cost) items are often a cat’s preferred toys. Some suggestions are wadded-up paper, foil balls, string and plastic rings from milk jugs. Throw a variety of objects for your cat to see which ones she’s most interested in chasing.

Using vertical space for cat enrichment

Upright structures and elevated perches will serve your cat’s climbing and clawing needs. To let your cat experience a bit of the outdoors while indoors, place perches, cat furniture (such as cat trees) or resting areas by the windows in your home. Cat furniture can be quite expensive to purchase, so you might want to try the DIY approach. For more information, search online for “DIY cat furniture” ideas.

Something as easy as clearing off the back of a couch that’s near a window can expand your cat’s horizons. A birdbath or bird feeder placed within sight of the window can increase her enjoyment. (Don’t worry about the birds — they easily become habituated to their “admirers.”)

One note of caution: Watch out for roaming cats in your yard, since the sight of those other cats can trigger stress and possibly urine marking in an indoor cat.

Catteries and catios

You can give your cat some safe time outdoors by building an outdoor enclosure (often called a cattery or catio) for your cat. Once your cattery is built, you can incorporate other sources of enrichment, such as toys and cat trees, into it. And don’t forget to

routinely check the structure for stability and safety. To find out what types of structures other people have created, search the internet for “cat enclosures” or “catios.

Video and audio products

Videos specifically designed to interest cats have recently been developed, and some cats do enjoy them. Some CDs, such as “Through a Cat’s Ear,” have also been designed specifically for cat enrichment. Little research exists regarding the effect of music on cats, but anecdotally many cats seem to respond favorably.

Aromatherapy for cats

Cats can benefit from aromatherapy, just like humans, so using scent is another way to provide enrichment. Catnip, of course, is the most common type of scent enrichment for felines. Other options include getting used food-packaging boxes (e.g., the boxes that fruit and vegetables come in) from your local grocery store, bringing in items from outside (e.g., sticks or leaves), and spritzing diluted essential oils onto blankets.

Cats get used to smells quickly, so make sure you rotate the scents often and replace items frequently. Also, keep in mind that certain smells can be unpleasant or even harmful to your cat so research may be required if you’re using essential oils or manmade scents.

Teaching your cat tricks

Training, including teaching tricks, provides great mental stimulation for pets. Cats can be taught to respond to any number of cues, from “sit” to “down” to “wave.” Using positive reinforcement is a great way to be successful with training your cat. Not only will it be more fun for both of you, it will also be more effective and efficient.

One of the best methods using positive reinforcement is clicker training. It's also a fantastic method for trick training because it allows you to teach complicated tricks, such as piano playing.

See ['Learn more about clicker training'](#)

Cat comfort zones

Calming activities are just as much a part of enrichment as stimulating activities. In addition, every animal needs a “comfort zone” where he or she can go to feel safe and relax. Closets, open crates, high shelves, cat trees, the space under beds and rooms sectioned off with baby gates are great places to put a comfy cat bed or blanket to create a safe place. If your cat is resting in her safe place, make sure to leave her alone; this is her quiet time away from everyone.

To enhance your cat's comfort zone, you may want to add calming products. Some examples are Feliway spray and diffuser, a NurtureCalm collar and the scent of lavender.

Keeping cats safe

Whatever types of enrichment you choose for your cat, make sure you play safe. Cats are capable of eating almost any object, and many objects can cause serious problems if they are ingested. For example, string toys should be used only with supervision. Remember to supervise your cat with any new toy to make sure it's safe.

Caution must also be used when playing with a laser pointer. The laser can damage your cat's vision, and some cats may begin to focus too much on the moving light. Also, keep in mind that any other pets or children in your house can potentially choke on smaller toys or pieces of toys. Consult with your veterinarian if you have any questions.