

Enrichment Protocol for Shelter Cats

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

Each shelter animal should be provided with enrichment each day. This should not be considered “extra” – it is part of the humane treatment of confined companion animals.

Consider all of the animal’s senses when providing enrichment.

Olfactory Stimulation

Cats have an amazing sense of smell and this sense should be stimulated daily. Be aware, however, that cats find some scents (citrus, menthol, floral perfumes) offensive or irritating.

Having the cats use their amazing sense of smell to search for hidden treats is a great enrichment strategy.

Provide a small pinch of catnip every few days. While some cats do not respond to catnip, others find it pleasurable. Most cats get mellow after eating catnip, but if a cat gets over-stimulated by the catnip – discontinue the practice for that cat.

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 Dog’s Ear) should be played at a low volume in the shelter during daytime hours. The music should be turned off at night because all animals require quiet time in order to sleep well.

New research shows that cat-appropriate music can be used for calming or auditory stimulation (Snowdon & Savage, Applied Animal Behaviour Science 2015). This music can be obtained online.

Cats can also benefit from playing CD’s of bird songs for a few minutes each day.

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 and should have a place to hide if needed.

Other visually stimulating things can be placed outside cat cages such as perpetual motion toys, mobiles, fish tanks or bird feeders outside a window to provide them with something interesting to look at.

Tactile Stimulation

Many animals respond positively to tactile stimulation from humans. This stimulation involves petting and brushing. Along with the tactile stimulation comes social interaction and this practice helps to ensure that these social animals receive the attention they need. Make sure to identify the kind of touch the cat appreciates. For example cats rarely like their belly rubbed.

Taste Stimulation

Cats should be given special food treats daily to stimulate their taste buds.

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. Below are some additional ideas:

1. Food Gathering enrichment

Presenting food/treats inside a Kong, feeder ball or empty container so that the animal must work to get them out.

2. Clicker training

Clicker training encourages the animal to think and can be done with cats as well as dogs.

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 and jump.

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 are social animals and as such should be provided with opportunities for social interaction with humans and conspecifics (if appropriate).

Cats are social animals but very particular about their social partners. Those cats who do well with other cats should be housed in the colony room. Observations should be made regularly to insure that each cat has access to the food, water and litterbox.