



Setting Up the Environment for Your Cat

The first step with any behavioral issue is to take your cat to the veterinarian for a full evaluation. Cats are very stoic animals and will hide illness and injury. Sometimes our only clue that something is physically wrong is a behavioral symptom. Many behavioral modification programs can begin in conjunction with or shortly after your trip to the veterinarian.

Environment is very important to a cat and feeling safe in the environment is crucial. An enriched environment will prevent unacceptable behaviors and promote physical and emotional health for your cat. Use the following guidelines for setting up your home.

Food and Water

Cats in the wild do not keep their food next to water sources because they want to keep their water source free of bacteria. Some domestic cats will not mind having both their bowls together but others will prefer to have them separated. Sufficient water consumption is very important for domestic cats. In the wild, they receive most of their water from the food that they eat. Due to this, cats do not have the same thirst drive as humans or dogs. When domestic cats are only fed dry food they often do not get enough water to stay properly hydrated so it is important to make the water as attractive as possible. You should have water available in multiple locations throughout the home and in multiple types of bowls. Purchase a fountain style bowl for added allure. Keep water bowls away from food bowls and refresh the water at least once a day. In a multi-cat household, each cat should have their own food bowl and feeding area. To avoid one cat keeping another from the food dishes, make sure that each cat has a safe area to in which to eat. Some cats will not mind eating right next to each other and others would rather eat alone.

Litter Boxes

Avoiding litter box problems is much easier than solving them. Cats are incredibly vulnerable while eliminating so it is vital that the litter box area is a safe area where nothing bad ever happens to them. In a multi-cat home be sure there are separate elimination stations throughout the home, on each level of the home and at each end of the home. You should have a litter box for each cat plus one. Each litter box should be 1.5 times the length of your cat. Make sure that each litter box has two possible escape routes to avoid a cat being trapped and attacking while in the litter box. An easy solution to this is to use uncovered litter boxes and pull them 8-12 inches away from the wall. If you have dogs or children it will be very important that they do not have access to these areas. Most cats want a quiet location, away from major activity in the home and away from 'unpredictable' sounds like the laundry room. Add a nightlight to the litter box area. *See also the article on Litter Box Problems.*

Sleeping and Resting Areas

An adult domestic cat sleeps an average of 16 hours a day. Having a safe place to call their own is very important. Make sure all the cats in the home have equal options for safe and comfortable resting areas. One cat may claim the couch all to herself and the other cat will need a soft bed as well. Some cats prefer sleeping on the ground in a bed and others will prefer sleeping high up in a cat tower. Make sure there are options available so your cats can choose where they are the most comfortable.

Vertical Space

To increase the territory of your cat, think vertical. Take a cat's eye view of your home. Every room should have a place for your cat to hide. Every room should have vertical access such as a cat tower, cat shelves, bookshelf or back of the couch. Every vertical space should have at least 2 ways to get back down to the ground and every hiding place should have two exits available. Some cats prefer to navigate the room without ever touching the floor, others will move along the walls and behind things and others will confidently stroll through the middle of the room. Take care that you are providing the environment your cat needs to feel safe and enriched. *See also the article on Fearful Behaviors.*

Scratching Posts

Scratching is a natural cat behavior that maintains nail health, stretches muscles, relieves stress and marks territory. Provide tall stable scratching posts in different areas of the home, near windows and around major cat traffic routes. You may need to experiment with material on the tower to see what your cat enjoys the most. This will give your cat an appropriate option for this normal behavior. If your cat is choosing to scratch on your couch, move the scratching post next to your couch. In addition, provide horizontal options for scratching such as the cardboard options available at many retail stores. *See also the article on Destructive Scratching.*

Time sharing

If you pay close attention you may notice that your cats have worked out a time share program with the resources in your home. You may notice that one cat sleeps on your bed during the day but not at night with you. One cat may get to sit in your lap while watching TV but doesn't follow you to the kitchen because a different cat will. Some resources are claimed by one cat and one cat alone, for example a favorite cat bed or food bowl. Other resources are used by multiple cats either at the same time or at different times throughout the day. *See also the article on Cats in Conflict.*

If after trying these suggestions you are still experiencing undesirable behaviors in your cat, SUBMIT QUESTIONS by clicking the link under Ask A Trainer on the Behavior and Training page of the Wayside Waifs website: www.waysidewaifs.org.