

Enriching the Life of your Cat
Daniel Estep, Ph.D. and Suzanne Hetts, Ph.D.
www.AnimalBehaviorAssociates.com
Copyright ABA, Inc.

Most of us who have cats keep them indoors for their safety and to prevent problems in the neighborhood. This is a good idea, but cats did not evolve as indoor animals. Sometimes our indoor cats become bored and create problems for us, scratching the furniture, attacking our feet in play or just crying for attention. Are there things we can do to enrich the lives of our cats? Yes. Although this topic has not received much attention by researchers, there seem to be some general things that can be done to enrich the lives of house cats.

Since most domestic cats are friendly with people and other cats, social contact with people or other cats can be enriching. Not all cats get along well with other cats so care must be taken to be sure the cats get along and that having other cats around doesn't create more problems than it solves. Giving your cat "quality time" with you and other family members can also be enriching. This may include petting, play, brushing the cat or just sitting with her. Many cats seem to like to be in the center of human activities, so allowing them to be with you when you have family activities or social gatherings can be rewarding for her.

Many cats continue to play well into adulthood so having interactive toys for your cat can be valuable. Toys that allow the cat to run, jump and grab such as a feather or piece of cloth on the end of a string, can be very entertaining. Puzzle toys that contain food or other small objects that the cat has to take out of the toy can also keep the cat busy for long periods of time. Cardboard boxes or paper bags are often attractive, inexpensive play objects for cats. Cats seem to get bored easily with some toys, so rotating play objects from time to time can help to keep toys exciting for the cat.

Teaching your cat a trick or two, such as sitting up for a treat or meowing on cue or fetching a toy can be an enriching experience for you and your cat. Yes, cats can be taught tricks, and there are now several books and programs available to help you teach your cat different tricks.

Giving your cat more interesting places in the house can be helpful such as a perch near a window or a high platform in the family room where the cat can sit and watch the family activities. Giving your indoor cat some controlled access to the outside can also be helpful. Building an outdoor cage for your cat, taking your cat on walks on a leash and harness, or even taking your cat on short trips in the car can be enjoyable for some cats. The cat must be gradually adapted to the cage, the harness or the car so that she isn't terrified by the experience.

By thinking about what seems to be rewarding to your specific cat, you will be able to think of a variety of activities that will enrich the life of your cat, and make your relationship with your cat more satisfying.