

Meeting Your Cat's Behavioral Needs
Daniel Estep, Ph.D. and Suzanne Hetts, Ph.D.
www.AnimalBehaviorAssociates.com
Copyright ABA, Inc.

At a recent conference on animal welfare, we spoke on the behavioral needs of cats. While keeping a cat indoors is a good idea for health and safety reasons, all indoor environments are not created equal. You want to create a physical and social environment that meets your cat's behavioral needs. Meeting your cat's behavioral needs is the best way to prevent behavior problems.

While some cats do well living with a feline buddy, while other cats are better off as single cats. Social crowding may be an issue if you have too many cats in a small space. While it's difficult to quantify how many cats are too many, warning signs that social conflict has reached an unhealthy level include:
your cats are having frequent fights, especially if they cause injury;
one or more cats are hiding and afraid to move around for fear of being attacked;
one or more cats are urine marking frequently. The more of these signs you see, the more stressful the environment.

In addition to a peaceful environment, cats like to make use of vertical space. Create high places where your cat can rest, survey his world, and escape from other cats and people when he wants. Tall cat condos meet this need, as would a simple cushion on top of the refrigerator, and a clear pathway to reach this perch. Providing multiple high places for escape is more important the more cats in the house.

Cats also need hiding places. Simple things like boxes or paper bags scattered around make great hiding spots. Put a cat bed under a chair or behind a couch to make a secluded spot more comfortable. Many cats like to hide out in the back of open clothes drawers, and become trapped when you shut the drawer. So either don't leave your drawers open, or be sure and check that your cat isn't in the back before closing it.

Cats need something to scratch and litterboxes that conform to their preferences. We've provided details on how to create cat friendly litterboxes and scratching posts in previous columns. A litterbox booklet can also be ordered from our website.

Cats are curious, active creatures and need mental stimulation as well as physical activity. Obesity in cats is a significant problem, because many cats do not get the exercise they need. Set aside consistent time to play with your cat. Toys that encourage your cat to exercise by running, pouncing and jumping help him burn calories. Consider enriching your cat's environment with some outdoor time by taking him for walks on a leash and harness, or purchasing or building an outdoor cat enclosure. The latter are available through numerous pet supply catalogs, or on the web.

Cats need social time with people as well. How much time they need, and what form it takes varies tremendously from cat to cat. Some cats, like our Buffett, could sit for hours on anyone's lap and have never met a stranger. Other cats are content with merely sitting in the same room with people, but don't enjoy a lot of physical contact or petting.