

Through Your Cat's Eyes: 5 Ways to Enrich Her Environment

If you share your home with a feline, you may not realize it, but you truly are living with a 'captive animal.' Wild or not, I firmly believe all kitties should live indoors. Try these tactics today to help your cat adapt and feel more at ease living indoors with you.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Feline family members can be loosely compared to wild animals living in captivity, because they retain many of the traits and behaviors of their wild counterparts, and are even considered "semi-domesticated" by some experts
- Since your cat is much safer living indoors, which is a not entirely natural environment from her perspective, it's important to take steps to make her living space and routine feline-friendly, because when healthy cats aren't comfortable in their environment, they often display sickness behaviors
- Environmental enrichment means enhancing the living situation of a captive animal to improve health and well-being, including safe, supervised outdoor time
- There are five key areas of your cat's environment you can focus on for enrichment purposes involve eating, drinking, and elimination areas; outlets for climbing, scratching, resting, and hiding; interactions with humans; sensory stimulation; and feline housemates

If you share your hearth and home with a cat, you may not realize you're living with what can be loosely described as a "captive animal." This is in part because there's significant disagreement among scientists and biologists as to whether pet cats are actually domesticated.

And I understand the controversy, because let's face it: there's a certain wild vibe about our feline family members — even tiny kittens — no matter how long they've shared our homes or snuggled on our laps.

Cats are the most popular pet worldwide and have lived with humans for thousands of years. But despite their long and close association with us, cats turn feral without human contact, and it's often difficult to "tame" a feral kitten once it reaches a certain age. Another sign of your kitty's wild side: it's unlikely she'll starve to death if she escapes into the great outdoors, since her instinct to hunt never diminishes.

Some Experts Believe Cats Are Only 'Semi-Domesticated'

In 2014, scientists performed an analysis of the genome of an Abyssinian cat (a domestic female named Cinnamon whose lineage was traced back several generations) that revealed certain genes responsible for domestication. However, the researchers concluded that cats are only "semi-domesticated," especially when compared to dogs. From the study abstract:

"Cats are considered only a semi-domesticated species, because many populations are not isolated from wildcats and humans do not control their food supply or breeding."

"We therefore predicted a relatively modest effect of domestication on the cat genome based on recent divergence from and ongoing admixture with wildcats, a relatively short human cohabitation time compared with dogs, and the lack of clear morphological and behavioral differences from wildcats, with docility, gracility, and pigmentation being the exceptions."¹

However, not everyone is buying the semi-domesticated label. "There's no difference between a domesticated cat and a domesticated anything else," according to Greger Larson, an evolutionary biologist at the University of Oxford. "Good luck trying to get a goat or a sheep to spend the night in your house."²

Even 'Wild Child' Pet Cats Should Live Indoors

Regardless of the controversy surrounding feline domestication, and even if your own cat is a wild thing, don't be tempted to throw open a door or window and encourage him to run free. While it's true living indoors isn't an entirely natural environment for your cat, letting him run around loose outside actually presents many more **risks to his health and longevity.**

Housecats with free access to the outdoors are much more likely to be exposed to viruses and other agents that cause serious disease. They can also be inadvertently poisoned or become prey for dogs and wild animals like coyotes. Fighting among outdoor cats is common, and someone has to come out the loser. Usually, it's the kitty who doesn't live outside full time and hasn't honed his street fighting skills.

Cats with access to the outdoors in winter are apt to look for warmth in hazardous places, like the wheel well or up inside the hood of a parked vehicle. Kitties have also been known to dart out into traffic after being startled or because another animal is chasing them.

So, I absolutely do not recommend you set your captive kitty free. A much smarter, safer alternative is to learn 1) what to look for in a cat who may not be feeling comfortable with his living arrangement, 2) what you can do to help your favorite feline feel more at ease living indoors with you, and 3) provide safe, supervised outdoor time, if your cat appears to be seeking it.

Feline Sickness Behaviors

Cats are known to demonstrate sickness symptoms and behaviors in response to elements of their environment that make them uncomfortable. These can include one or a combination of the following:

- Vomiting, diarrhea
- Decreased interest in eating, grooming, or interacting with people or other pets
- Lethargy; sleeping more than usual
- **Eliminating outside the litterbox**
- Behaving as if in pain

Sickness behaviors develop when an animal isn't able to interact in a natural way with her environment. Instead of performing a normal behavior like hunting prey, for example, a cat will be motivated to behave in ways that promote recovery from illness, even when no illness exists.

The same physiologic and behavioral response a kitty would have to an infection can be brought on by undesirable changes in her environment. Psychological stress can trigger an immune response and the release of cytokines, which promote inflammation in the body.

Sickness behaviors are considered a functional problem, which means they tend to come and go in response to changes in a cat's environment.

The way to help your own feline BFF enjoy life as a captive kitty is through environmental enrichment.

Environmental Enrichment

Environmental enrichment is generally understood to mean improving the living situation of captive animals to enhance their health and quality of life. Enriching a kitty's surroundings usually involves doing less and more.

It's about creating minimally stressful living quarters and reducing or eliminating unusual external events that cause anxiety. Any change to her daily routine is experienced by your cat as a stress-inducing unusual external event. The goal is to minimize change and maximize the amount of control kitty feels over her situation.

Enrichment may also mean adding or changing things in your pet's environment that encourage her to perform or mimic natural feline activities like climbing to a high spot or hunting "prey" in the form of a cat toy or feeder. Spending safe, supervised time outside in a "catio," courtyard or on a **harness** is another great way to provide outdoor enrichment while keeping kitty safe.

Because change is unnerving for your cat, nothing should be forced on her. If you decide to purchase a climbing tree, for example, place it in an appropriate spot and let your cat discover it on her own terms.

5 Key Areas of Your Cat's Environment

There are several components to a cat's environment, and each should be considered from the viewpoint of a feline, including:

1. **A safe, secure food and water station, and a safe, secure litterbox location** — In the wild, cats not only hunt prey, but they are also prey for other animals. They feel most vulnerable while eating, drinking, or eliminating. This vulnerability is what causes a fearful response when a cat's food dish or litterbox is in a noisy or high traffic area.

The basics of your kitty's life — food, water, and his bathroom, should be located away from any area that is noisy enough to startle him or make him feel trapped and unable to escape.

2. **An approved place to climb and to scratch and places to rest and hide** — Cats are climbers and scratchers. It's what nature compels them to do, and those urges don't disappear because kitty lives indoors. Your cat also needs her own resting place and a hiding place (sometimes these are the same spot) where she feels untouchable.

In case you hadn't noticed, your favorite feline prefers to deal with the other creatures in her life on her terms, and according to her schedule. Happy captive kitties are given the opportunity to feel in control of their environment.

3. **Consistency in interactions with humans** — Your cat feels most comfortable when his daily routine is predictable. Performing little rituals, for example when you leave the house and upon your return, can help your kitty feel more comfortable with the comings and goings of humans in the household. A ritual can be as simple as giving kitty a treat each time you leave and a bit of petting as soon as you come back through the door.

Playtime should also be consistent. Discover what type of toy (prey) he responds to and engage him in play, on his timetable. You can encourage him to play, but it's useless to try to force the issue. And when he's had enough, he's had enough!

4. **Appropriate sensory stimulation** — Think eyes, ears, and nose. Some cats love to look out the window. Others are mesmerized by fish in an aquarium. Some even enjoy **kitty videos**. Also provide auditory stimulation similar to the ambient sounds your cat hears when you're home, such as music, a TV on in the background, etc. You can stimulate your pet's keen olfactory senses with cat-safe herbs or synthetic feline pheromones.

If you happen to have a safe, fully enclosed porch or patio area, or a catio that prevents your cat from getting out and other animals from getting in, your kitty might enjoy spending time outside in good weather. I don't recommend you leave a cat in an outdoor enclosure if you're not home though.

5. **The company of other cats** — This is a tricky area. The way cats interact with each other is very different from humans and, in fact, most other animals. Trying to predict how two or more cats will get on living under the same roof is nearly impossible.

Intact males can be a special challenge in a multi-cat household, as can several queens. Problems with inter-cat aggression can arise when a new cat is brought home, when two cat owners blend their feline families, and even among cats that have lived peaceably together for years.

Because of the complex nature of feline social structures, if you have a multi-cat household and there are problems, or you're hoping to add a new cat to the family, I recommend you talk with your veterinarian or an **animal behavior specialist**. Often there are things you can do to minimize problems with aggression or other undesirable behaviors. Sometimes, unfortunately, re-homing one of the cats becomes the only option to preserve the health and quality of life of all the kitties involved.

Captive But in Control!

I know you want to do everything you can to help your captive kitty have an excellent quality of life.

Environmental enrichment, **species-specific nutrition**, and regular wellness checkups with an integrative veterinarian will ensure your cat feels he's living life on his own terms.

Sources and References

¹ [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, Vol. 111, No. 48, November 10, 2014](#)

² [Slate, July 5, 2015](#)
