

Containments for Cats

Our topics for this week are:

- Cages and catteries
- Crates
- Fences and tunnels

Cats are semi-*arboreal* (tree-living) predators. When maintained in an enclosure, cats will use raised structures more often than the floor. Those that spend the most time on the floor are higher ranking, more dominant cats. Having an elevated area to rest and retreat is important for a feeling of security in cats, especially lower ranking cats. Long-term enclosures should provide height to include climbing frames, raised walkways, and platforms at various heights. Slanting boards, steps, and poles can help smaller or younger cats to move around the enclosure. The floor should be smooth and easy to clean but also provide enough traction to prevent slipping. Mesh flooring should never be used for cats due to resulting injury to their feet. Single or multiple cat enclosures with sufficient height for handlers to walk into are preferable. The enclosure should have no sharp points, edges, or protrusions.

Cages and Catteries

Cats are social animals, when active, but they like to rest alone. They can be housed in single cages or in group enclosures (catteries) if properly introduced to others in the group and if there is sufficient space, easy access to food and litter boxes, resting areas, and individual hiding spaces at various levels.

The introduction of new cats to a group, called a clowder, should be done slowly by placing it in a nearby cage with a hiding box. Cats from either cage should not be able to reach into each other's cage. Exchange of bedding material or cage "toys" will aid adaptation. After about two weeks, if the cats seem adjusted to each other, the new cat can be released into the group. Under proper conditions, up to 20 to 25 cats can be housed together. When single cat long-term enclosures are used, the minimum floor space should be five square feet per cat with a height of at least three feet. Cages for short-term hospitalization in veterinary hospitals can be smaller. Larger, multi-leveled cages are preferable.

Cats should have hiding boxes in their cages with non-skid tops to reduce stress and visibility when desired. Cardboard boxes with doors cut in one end can be used as disposable hiding boxes and perches for cats. A hiding area can be created by a towel attached to half of a cage door. Some commercial cages have built-in hiding plus litter boxes attached to the larger main compartment of the cage. Resting areas should have soft padding. Cats that sleep on soft surfaces have longer periods of deep sleep.

Scratching and kneading surfaces should be provided for cats to exercise their instinctual desire, mark their territory with their paws, and sharpen their claws. Suitable surfaces may

include scratch posts, carpet, and wood. Pheromones from cats' paws can be rubbed from a previous used scratching post to a new post to encourage its use.

Conventional litter boxes are smaller than that preferred by cats. Litter boxes are ideally 36 inches in length, and cats should be able to get at least 3 feet away from a litter pan to rest and eat. In group enclosures there should be at least one litter box per two cats. Litter boxes should be cleaned each time they are soiled or at least once per day. However, when sanitation permits, only spot cleaning a cat cage allows the personal odors to persist and provide stress release. If baskets or boxes are provided in addition to litter pans, these will reduce or eliminate the desire for the cat to rest in litter pans. Cats allowed to roam in multi-leveled homes should have at least one litter box on each level of the house.

Enrichment toys should be provided for mental stimulation. Placing cages next to windows, screened in porches or window boxes, or having glass backs on cages that permit cats to view activity in another room or outdoors are good environmental enrichments. Favorite enclosure "toys" for cats are small mobile objects with a complex surface texture such as a tennis ball. Puzzle toys in which pieces of dry food can be hidden, but the cat can extract, can provide good mental stimulation. Paper sacks and cardboard boxes are favorite toys of cats. Excessive confinement, or confinement devoid of environmental enrichment for cats, does not lead to the stereotypic behaviors in cats common to other species, such as cannibalism, pacing, or self-mutilation. Cats respond to stressful environments primarily by not eating, grooming, or playing.

Crates

When acclimating cats to a transport crate, they should have constant access to the crate. The crate should be secured on an elevated surface, such as a table. A soft towel should be provided inside the crate to lie on. The cat should receive toys or food treats whenever entering it to prepare the cat for crate travel. A toy dangling from the top of the crate may be tried as an added incentive to spend more time in the crate. Commercial water-resistant cardboard boxes are available that permit perching, hiding, and transport.

Crates for cats should have a front and top door. Cats are more tolerant of being placed into and taken out of a top opening crate than a front opening crate. If a top door is not available, a clamshell crate that has an easily opened top half will suffice. Or, a clamshell crate can be placed on its end with the front door then on top to introduce a cat into the crate from the top and then gently right the crate.

Fences and Tunnels

The American Veterinary Medical Association recommends that companion cats should be kept indoors. Staying indoors is associated with a longer life span, decreased predation of songbirds, and decreased relinquishment of ownership. For some owners, allowing their companion cat time outdoors provides the cat high quality environmental enrichment. Cat fences and tunnels are a couple of ways that outdoor excursions can be relatively safe for the cat.

Cat fencing is polypropylene netting attached to stanchions angled inward to the containment yard. The netting should be attached to the fence above a typical jump height of cats, i.e., four feet.

Flexible, portable exercise tunnels with closeable ends are commercially available for

cats. The tunnels can be collapsed for storage when not in use. Tunnels provide an alternative to special fencing as a means of permitting outdoor exercise and mental enrichment while keeping a cat in confinement.

Now, let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- Cats should have an elevated surfaces and hiding boxes in enclosures to reduce stress
- Litter boxes should be provided for at least each cat and cleaned daily
- Cat crates should have both front and top access doors.

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint* published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is available at www.betteranimalhandling.com

Don't forget serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.