



## **Cat Enrichment (Toys, Puzzles, Aromatherapy, and More!)**

*Information adapted from the original article by Best Friends Animal Society*

Providing for your cat's mental well-being is just as important as providing for her physical well-being. All animals, including pets, have natural behaviors and needs; to be healthy and happy, they must have opportunities to express those natural behaviors in appropriate ways. So, meeting your cat's mental and emotional needs helps her to lead a fulfilling life and have fewer behavior issues, and also allows you to forge a stronger bond with her.

How do you provide enrichment for your cat? There are a number of ways, such as giving her a variety of toys, providing perches, training and playing games with your cat, and much more.

### **Self-play toys for cats**

Self-play toys are those that your cat can play with on her own. Toys that encourage chasing and pouncing are typically the most enjoyable for cats. Some simple and cheap options are cardboard boxes, large paper bags (with the handles removed for safety) and crumpled-up pieces of paper. Other options are catnip-filled toys, springs, and wall- or door-mounted toys. There are also several battery-operated toys on the market to provide your cat with plenty of entertainment when she's alone. Remember to watch her for a while after you give her a new toy, to make sure she is playing safely with it.

### **Food puzzles**

Foraging toys (also called food puzzles, puzzle feeders and treat dispensers) help satisfy a cat's natural instinct to search for food. The basic principle is that you fill up the toy with dry kibble, wet food or treats, and the cat learns to manipulate the toy to release the food. Some toys are stationary, such as interactive puzzle feeders like the Trixie 5-in-1 Activity Center, and some are designed to move around, like the Kitty Kong. Other examples of purchased toys are Trixie Mad Scientist for Cats and Nina Ottosson cat puzzle toys. Another type of food-dispensing toy is Pavlov's Cat, which releases dry food when a cat scratches the toy.

You can also make your own food puzzles. There are numerous videos and articles on the internet showing how to make DIY cat toys or puzzle toys. One of the easiest DIY options is to “scatter feed”: Simply toss your cat’s kibble on the floor and let her eat up all the pieces. To provide more of a challenge, hide small piles of her kibble around the house and let her search for her meal.

## **Interactive toys**

Interactive toys help strengthen the bond between you and your cat by letting you share fun and positive experiences. Both you and your cat can have a great time playing with wand-type toys with strings, feathers and fabric strips attached. One popular product is the Cat Dancer, which can function as either a self-play or an interactive toy.

Some cats enjoy playing with laser pointers, chasing the point of light around the house. Make sure that your cat is eventually able to “catch” something while playing with the laser pointer; point it at a toy that your cat can then play with, so she doesn’t get too frustrated.

Low-cost (or no cost) items are often a cat’s preferred toys. Some suggestions are wadded-up paper, foil balls, string and plastic rings from milk jugs. Throw a variety of objects for your cat to see which ones she’s most interested in chasing.

## **Using vertical space for cat enrichment**

Upright structures and elevated perches will serve your cat’s climbing and clawing needs. To let your cat experience a bit of the outdoors while indoors, place perches, cat furniture (such as cat trees) or resting areas by the windows in your home. Cat furniture can be quite expensive to purchase, so you might want to try the DIY approach. For more information, search online for “DIY cat furniture” ideas.

Something as easy as clearing off the back of a couch that’s near a window can expand your cat’s horizons. A birdbath or bird feeder placed within sight of the window can increase her enjoyment. (Don’t worry about the birds — they easily become habituated to their “admirers.”)

One note of caution: Watch out for roaming cats in your yard, since the sight of those other cats can trigger stress and possibly urine marking in an indoor cat.

## **Catteries and catios**

You can give your cat some safe time outdoors by building an outdoor enclosure (often called a cattery or catio) for your cat. Once your cattery is built, you can incorporate other sources of enrichment, such as toys and cat trees, into it. And don't forget to routinely check the structure for stability and safety. To find out what types of structures other people have created, search the internet for "cat enclosures" or "catios."