

# Bay Hill Cat Hospital

## Client Education Series #1

### Environmental Needs of All Cats

A cat's level of comfort with its environment is intrinsically linked to its physical health, emotional well-being and behavior. Having a basic understanding of the cat's species-specific environmental needs and how cats interact with their environment will provide a foundation for addressing these fundamental requirements. Addressing environmental needs is essential (not optional) for the optimum wellbeing of the cats. Environmental needs include those relating to the cat's physical surroundings (indoors or outdoors; in the home environment or the veterinary hospital, etc) but also those affecting social interaction, including responses to human contact.

*Addressing environmental needs... How does it help?*

- ❖ Fewer unwanted behaviors and less illness
- ❖ Improved recognition of disease
- ❖ Easier handling of cats at home and in the practice
- ❖ Strengthened bond between owner and cat
- ❖ Reduced stress in multi-cat households
- ❖ Happier cats

### Five Pillars of a Healthy Feline Environment

#### *Pillar 1: Provide a safe place*

While cats can comfortably live alone or in social groups, they hunt alone. The risk of injury represents a serious survival risk. As a result, cats tend to 'avoid and evade' rather than confront perceived threats. A safe place enables the cat to withdraw from conditions it considers threatening or unfamiliar. All of the cat's senses are mobilized to detect threatening conditions, which are signaled by strange smells, loud or strange noises, unfamiliar objects, and the presence of unknown or disliked animals. The degree of sensitivity to perceived threats varies according to individual cats. By having the option to withdraw, a cat is able to exert some control over its environment, which it finds satisfying in itself.

*Pillar 2: Provide multiple and separated key environmental resources: food, water, toileting areas, scratching areas, play areas and resting or sleeping areas (for each social group):*

Since cats are solitary survivors, they need to have free access to key environmental resources without being challenged by other cats or other potential threats. In addition to avoiding competition for access, separation of resources reduces the risk of stress and stress-associated diseases, and satisfies the cat's natural need for exploration and exercise.

***Pillar 3: Provide opportunity for play and predatory behavior***

The cat has a strong instinct to display a predatory behavioral sequence consisting of locating, capturing (stalking, chasing, pouncing), killing, preparing and eating its prey. Predatory behavior occurs even in well-fed cats.<sup>31</sup> For cats that are able to hunt, predation consumes a significant proportion of their daily activities, requiring considerable physical activity and mental engagement.<sup>32</sup> Inhibiting or failing to provide cats with opportunities for predatory-type behaviors can result in obesity or boredom and frustration that can express itself as overgrooming, stress associated disease or misdirected aggressive behavior.

***Pillar 4: Provide positive, consistent and predictable human-cat social interaction***

Affiliative behaviors are integral to maintaining positive relationships. Similar behaviors are often directed towards preferred humans; for example, rubbing the head and body on the person, sitting on a person's knee and even, in some cases, licking their skin in an attempt to groom them. However, there is a broad spectrum of social preferences among cats, which can be influenced by genetics and early rearing experiences. Problems such as aggression directed at other cats or humans, stress-related disease and inappropriate elimination may occur when the cat's social preferences are disregarded

***Pillar 5: Provide an environment that respects the importance of the cat's sense of smell***

Compared with humans, cats depend much more upon chemical and olfactory information to explore their environment. If cats sense threatening olfactory or pheromonal information, or if they cannot express their sensory signals as described above, problematic behaviors such as inappropriate elimination or scratching and stress-related illness (eg, urinary tract disease) can occur.

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