

Give cats mental stimulation by recreating the challenges of hunting

Some say cats are known as solitary creatures that only want your attention for their basic needs. The rest of the time, felines are quite happy to laze around and sleep. But do they need more stimulation than getting up to eat and relieve themselves?

“Particularly in Hong Kong, a lot of cats spend time indoors, and there is a real risk of frustration when their needs are not being met,” says veterinarian behaviourist Cynthia Smillie, at Animal Behaviour Veterinary Practice.

“Cats can suffer physical and emotional problems if they don’t have the normal challenges of hunting. There will be a big void in their day and they will fill it with inappropriate behaviour.”

Furry felines, Smillie adds, can express inappropriate behaviour by scratching objects, excessive sleeping and overeating. These mannerisms can then lead to medical problems, such as obesity, joint problems, diabetes and any medical problem associated with lack of exercise.

“Cats have all this energy, but if they don’t have an outlet for hunting and playing, it can cause a lot of problems,” explains the former deputy executive director of Hong Kong’s Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

If your cat has left claw marks on your couch, get a scratching post, recommends Smillie. “In an indoor environment, cat scratching can be done through frustration, and leaving claw marks is part of the cat’s normal repertoire,” she says. In the wild, cats prepare their claws for hunting by scratching trees, and this act also marks the feline’s territory.

Smillie points out many cat owners don’t provide a scratching post, while others who have purchased a post say their cat doesn’t use it. A major problem with many



Cats are hunters by nature.

scratching posts is they are constructed with rope wrapped around the post horizontally, she explains. As cats like to scratch vertically, any horizontally-lined post may not attract your cat to dig its claws in.

While there are numerous commercial scratching posts available on the market, Smillie suggests owners make their own with materials such as rope, corrugated cardboard or Hessian carpet. And to ensure your cat

loves it, Smillie recommends rubbing the post against the place where your cat has scratched – to transfer its scent. Other tips include using a wire brush to rake the post and create vertical lines; and sprinkling the post with catnip. Whether you do-it-yourself or buy off the shelf, check the post is tall enough for your cat to get a good stretch, Smillie says.

As cats are natural climbers, they have a penchant for perching up high. “It’s important that cats are given a resting area where they can observe in high places – to see what’s going on in the environment – from a safety aspect,” she says. A variety of choices include modular units, platforms, climbing frames and free-standing furniture such as bookshelves. Instead of dishing out cat food at the same spot every day, Smillie suggests placing dry food in small containers, cardboard boxes, empty egg cartons or even paper bags that are slightly twisted closed to be scattered all over the home. Owners can also use bottles with holes cut into them, allowing the cat to play around while getting its food. Either way, your feisty feline will have to search for its food, while being physically and mentally challenged.

“In the wild, cats will spend six or more hours hunting, catching and eating prey. And for about every 100 tries they will only succeed about 10 per cent of the time,” she says. “Putting the food down in the same spot gives your cat no mental stimulation.”

Don’t expect your cat to entertain itself. “People expect their cat to amuse itself, but it won’t. A lot of play has to do with improving hunting skills, [especially] at dawn and dusk,” Smillie says. *Jade Lee-Duffy*

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