

## **Behaviour, Enrichment and Rehoming Program for Confined Cats**



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### **Overview**

The Behaviour, Enrichment and Rehoming Program for cats is comprised of behavioural interventions to ensure a more enriched environment for confined cats. It has been designed to be used for cats kept at shelters, pounds, universities etc. Cats are initially assessed to determine their behavioural needs. This becomes the basis of individual enrichment and rehoming requirements for each cat. The program also includes ongoing monitoring procedures to ensure that the cats' psychological health is maintained. The monitoring helps identify any behavioural issues before they become serious conditions. Rehabilitation is also available if needed. In addition to behavioural enrichment and welfare monitoring, Fantastic Felines - a post adoptive interactive enrichment program is offered. The Fantastic Felines program was designed to enhance and strengthen the bond between people and their cats and reduce both the surrender and return rate of cats.

This comprehensive program has been used since 2007 in the Veterinary School at The University of Queensland. It has successfully rehomed and provided enriched lives for over 100 cats.

The program is based on behavioural assessment and rehabilitation procedures used at shelters in the UK and British Columbia. The post adoptive program is part of post graduate research at the

University of Queensland, School of Veterinary Science, into the reasons for relinquishment of cats and preventative methods to reduce surrender rates.

### Why use this program?

- Reduces psychological stress and improves health of cats
- Helps reduce unwanted behaviour and promote normal behaviour
- Increases the numbers of cats that can be rehomed
- Decreases the return rate
- Helps with rehoming, allows better matching of cat to potential owner

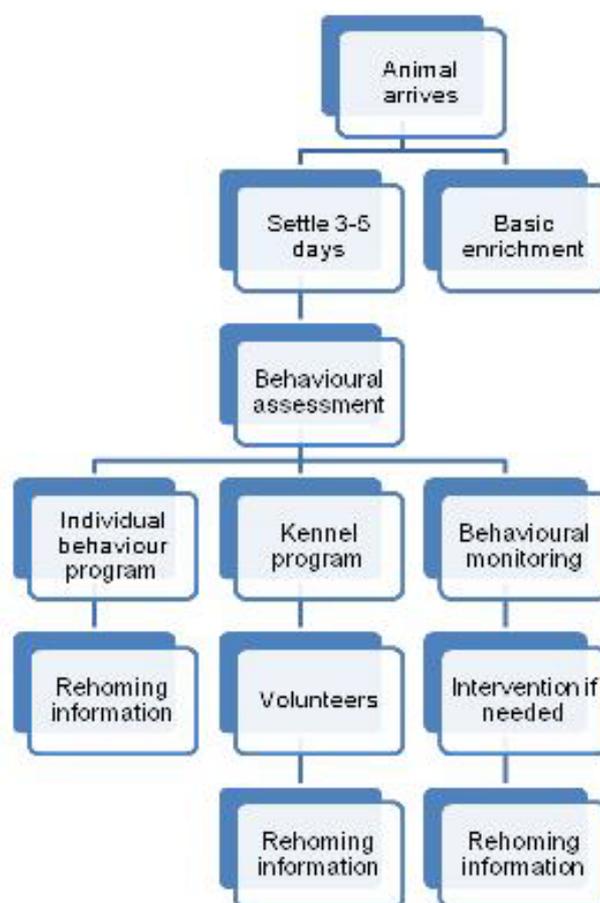


Figure 1. The Behaviour, Enrichment and Rehoming Program process of arrival, assessment, enrichment and rehoming

## **Behavioural file, assessment forms and schedules**

The program is based on recording observations, assessments and information on each cat to develop a behaviour and rehoming file comprised of:

- general information about the cat
- behavioural assessment results
- monitoring forms
- behavioural feedback and observations
- individual behaviour program (kennel program) including
  - o play therapy schedule
  - o food enrichment schedule
  - o socialisation schedule
- rehoming recommendations

To complete the Behavioural File, the following assessments, schedules and forms have been designed especially for the program:

1. Behavioural Assessment form (includes recommended enrichment schedule and rehoming recommendations)
2. Play therapy schedule
3. Food enrichment chart
4. Monitoring form

## **Program Procedure**

### **Before behavioural assessment - Basic enrichment**

The first step in the program is to provide enrichment from day one, before any assessments are completed. As soon as the cat arrives, observations are taken on how she/he is adapting to the new environment. During the first 3-7 days the cat is left to settle in and is not formally assessed at this point. At this stage, cats are kept away from other cats and are housed in a single cage or area. They are given basic enrichment to ensure they are getting daily stimulation. This includes:

- Scatter feed or hand feeding (if the cat responds well to people)
- At least 5 minutes of daily interactive play
- No interaction with other animals
- Limited handling

- Resting and hiding box in cage, with blanket
- Close monitoring of behaviour

### **Undertaking a cat behaviour assessment**

The second step in the program is to assess the cat's behaviour, likes and dislikes. Behaviour assessments are usually done after three to five days, once the cat has settled into the new environment. If the cat is showing signs of illness, poor self maintenance or intense fear, the cat is not ready to be assessed.

Each cat is assessed on the following:

- preferred toys and play styles
- interaction with other cats
- behaviour within cage
- behaviour out of cage
- interaction with people
- handling
- exploratory behaviour
- food motivation
- rehoming recommendations

A ball of paper, a piece of string, a brush, some treats, a pen and the behavioural assessment form are needed to complete the assessment. The assessment is always done with two people, one to observe the cat and take notes, the other to run the assessment and interact with the cat.

### **After the behavioural assessment - Individual behaviour and enrichment schedules**

The third step in the program is to develop individual behaviour and enrichment schedules for each cat. This is done by looking over the results of the behavioural assessment, completed in step two of the program. The behavioural assessment provides valuable information about the cat's energy levels and motivations. It also provides information on the cat's likes and dislikes, general personality, which food enrichment to use, what type of play therapy and toys to use and if any behavioural rehabilitation may be needed.

Food enrichment, play therapy and socialisation schedules are then created for each cat.

## *Food enrichment*

The first and most important thing to know about food enrichment is:

### **BAN THE BOWL!**



Cats are intelligent, inquisitive predators. They were designed to catch their own food. They were not designed to eat out of bowls. Feeding from bowls is banned unless the cat has a medical condition or bowl feeding is part of a rehabilitation program. Food enrichment methods provide mental stimulation and give cats the opportunity to use their ability to obtain food. For confined cats feeding time can be the most stimulating moment of the day – but when food arrives in a bowl, that moment is over fast. Food enrichment provides a challenge. It helps reduce boredom and frustration and can prevent depression or self destructive behaviour developing.

To use food enrichment methods the cat needs to be fed a complete high quality balanced dry diet. Canned food is used in some of the enrichment techniques; however, it is only a supplement and is not used as the main food.

Each of the food enrichment techniques are designed for a particular energy level or food motivation. The behavioural assessment assesses the cat's food motivation level. Once this is known the appropriate enrichment methods can be utilised. Food enrichment methods used in the program include scatter feeds, Kong, bottle, hand feeding, pyramid feeding, activity balls and brain training including clicker training.

### *Scatter feeding*

The scatter feed is a portion of the cat's daily dry feed scattered around the area the cat is kept in. The food is put not only on the floor but up on shelving, and other areas so the cat has to search for the food. It is a method that is often used with animals in zoos to provide enrichment, and more naturalistic feeding patterns. This food enrichment type is best with cats that are highly food motivated, and cats that prefer not to graze throughout the day. This method is also recommended for cats who are not assessed, or groups of cats who may have some issues with some of the other food enrichment techniques.

### *The Kong*

The Kong (arguably the most well known of the branded enrichment products) is usually used as a food enrichment method for dogs, but cats enjoying using it also. The Kong is filled with dry food about two thirds full, and topped off with some canned food to stop the dry food falling out. This food enrichment technique is best for cats that have medium food motivated, or are used to using many of the enrichment techniques described in this program.



The Kong

### *Activity balls*

Activity balls are hollow hard rubber balls with openings that can be adjusted, and when rolled around, let dry food fall out. They are great for cats that find the Kong easy, and are ready to move on to the next level of food enrichment. This food enrichment technique is best for cats which are highly food motivated.



This type of activity balls are the best to use

### *Bottle*

To make this food enrichment tool, an empty plastic bottle (.25 or .5 litre) is used. Labels are taken off and it is washed and dried. Approximately ten small holes are cut into it (big enough for dry food to fall out of) and it is filled with part of the cat's daily food intake.

Most cats find this food enrichment technique very easy and it can be a great beginner tool. As the cat gets used to the bottle fewer holes can be made so that getting the food becomes slightly more challenging.

This can be a good enrichment technique for multi-cat rooms. It is important however, to observe the cats closely (as with all food enrichment techniques), so that higher food motivated cats are not consuming all the food. This emphasises the importance of assessing each cat before housing them together, so that cats with equal energy levels and motivations for food, toys etc can be kept together. Housing a highly food motivated cat with a low food motivated cat will change the type of food enrichment methods that can be used. It is better to house cats with the same food motivations together to avoid confrontation between cats and domination or guarding of resources.



The bottle

### *Feeding pyramids*

Feeding pyramids are made from empty toilet paper rolls. Three rolls are stuck together in a row then two on top of those three, and one on top of those two, as shown in the photo. The 'pyramid' is placed on the floor or on a bench. Dry food is put into the tubes. It can gradually be made more challenging by pushing the food further in, or by making the pyramid bigger. This food enrichment technique is best for cats with medium food motivation.



The layout of the feeding pyramid



Feeding pyramid in use

### *Mental stimulation exercises 'brain training' and clicker training*

Another great food enrichment technique is 'brain training' and 'exercise', including clicker training. Like exercises for the body, brain or mental stimulation exercises are critical to maintaining good health. Cats can be taught 'sit', 'down', 'talk', 'wait', 'look', 'touch', 'jump' etc – the list is endless. These exercises are based on positive reinforcement. Positive reinforcement works on the principle that when the cat does something desirable, they are rewarded with food. Force or punishment, yelling, hitting or pushing is not used. It is not about controlling the cat, or trying to get the cat to act like a dog, the important thing here is to get the cat thinking about how to obtain food, and working to get it.



'Fishing' for her dinner

### ***Play therapy***

The second part of the individualised enrichment program for each cat includes play therapy. Play is extremely important to cats. Without daily play sessions cats will become frustrated, aggressive, depressed and unbalanced. As the walk is vital for stable healthy dogs, play is vital for balanced healthy cats. Play and exercise are essential in releasing energy and keeping cats mentally alert. Not all cats play the same way, some will have high play drives others will not. Some will prefer to play by themselves others will need a bit more encouragement, getting the most out of interactive play. The behavioural assessment includes a play drive test and results provide valuable information about the cat's play drive and what types of play and toys they prefer. Cats are rated as either having high, medium or low play drives. This rating along with information about toy and play preference is then used to create a play therapy schedule.



As with food motivation levels, in multi-cat housing it is best to place cats with similar play drives together to avoid lower play drive cats being harassed by high play drive cats. This is particularly important if daily play therapy is not available to all cats.

### ***Socialisation***

The third part of the individualised enrichment program for each cat includes socialisation - how much and what type of contact is recommended for the cat, with both humans and other cats. The behavioural assessment will determine how social the cat appears to be, and what and when social contact is recommended. This gives valuable rehoming matching information. The behavioural assessment may also reveal information on what types of other cats the cat can be housed with (and rehomed with) and exactly which type of housing will be better for the cat. Some cats require being housed singly to ensure they are more relaxed and content. These cats also need daily social interaction with humans. Social time is a great activity that volunteers can undertake if staff are not able to allocate daily time to each cat.

### **Monitoring, identifying problems and when/how to intervene**

Monitoring of each cat's behaviour on a daily basis takes place from day one of the cat's arrival. It is in addition to the basic enrichment, behavioural assessment and individual enrichment programs which are created shortly after the cat's arrival. It is vital that each cat has ongoing daily monitoring to identify any behavioural issues or emotional states which may need addressing. Monitoring is a preventive measure which specifically notes emotional states of the cat and use of and reaction to the environment.

Monitoring covers the following areas:

#### ***Self Maintenance and Health***

It is important to make daily observations of the cat's feeding, drinking, grooming and elimination behaviours as this can be some of the first behaviour to deteriorate with possible illness or

psychological stress. Basic physical examinations are also important to determine any lumps, missing fur, sores etc.

### *Cage/Room Observations*

Refers to how the cat is using their environment and includes notes on:

1. cage/room condition
2. cat's position in cage/room
3. cat's posture
4. cat's behaviour

### *Emotional States*

Posture, behaviour, body language and interaction are among some of the ways to measure emotional states of cats. Emotions rated during monitoring observations include 'relaxation', 'anxiety', 'fear', 'frustration' and 'depression'. It is vital to observe and note these daily as any state apart from 'relaxation' signify a problem of poor welfare. This is when an intervention may need to take place.

For example, if a cat becomes frustrated and there is no intervention put in place, the cat may become depressed. Not all cats showing signs of frustration will become depressed, but there is an increased risk of this occurring. Depression can be much harder to rehabilitate, and cats can and do deliberately suppress feeding and can become anorexic. This also increases their risk of disease. They are also at higher risk of getting parasites or skin conditions due to lower self maintenance.

Remember:

**NON-REWARD and IMPROVERISHED ENVIRONMENT lead to FRUSTRATION leads to  
CHRONIC FRUSTRATION leads to DEPRESSION**

(Gourkow 2004)

### *Behavioural Problems*

Any areas seen to be needing attention can immediately be addressed before poor welfare states develop. The program includes rehabilitation for any problem areas, although the aim of the monitoring procedure is to prevent these conditions from occurring.

Some of the common behavioural problems which might be seen include:

- inappropriate elimination – defecating or urinating outside of the litter box

- aggression towards other cats or people
- pica (eating of inappropriate objects, not related to anxiety)
- abnormal behaviours

### **When to intervene**

It cannot be emphasised enough how important it is to intervene upon the first sign of any of the emotional states indicating poor welfare. When cats experience emotional distress they will also experience physiological stress. This may lead to illness; a sign of stress may be outbreaks of Upper Respiratory Tract Infection, Urinary Tract Infections, ringworm or other infectious conditions. Cats living in confined environments such as shelters, are not able to run away, climb or hide or remove themselves from stressful situations and can experience ongoing stress which will not only impact their welfare but will affect their behaviour and possibly reducing their chances of being rehomed successfully.

### **General interventions for poor welfare states**

As soon as any of the poor welfare states are observed, reassessment of the cat's individual enrichment program is required. Depending on the emotional state observed, different rehabilitation approaches are used within the program. The following are some of the rehabilitation practices used in the program:

#### *Anxiety and fear*

Cats are removed from multi-cat environments and housed in a single enriched cage until they show significant reduction in fear or anxiety. Feliway may be used to help relieve anxiety and fear. Cats are assigned to one staff member or volunteer to work with. Calm voices are used to help rehabilitate these cats – low volume but high pitch. Cats responding positively are touched around their head area in short sessions only and are offered high value foods to encourage bonding and interaction. Cats are given a box to hide in to reduce their fear or anxiety, and provide them with some control over their environment.

Anxiety – cats are moved to quieter areas and social contact from many people is reduced. Staff move slowly around the cat and avoid loud or sudden noises. If the anxiety is related to other cats Feliway is sprayed on a cloth and put into the cat's room (when using Feliway remember to leave for

at least 20 minutes before putting it near the cat to ensure that the alcohol content has evaporated). Environmental enrichment that does not scare or startle the cat is provided. Calming music is played.

Fear – any medical conditions that may be causing pain which may lead to fear are initially ruled out. Upper Respiratory Tract Infections and Feline lower urinary tract disease are two very common conditions. Numbers of people interacting with the cat is limited and physical contact is reduced. Cats displaying defensive aggressive behaviours such as hissing, ears back, lashing out or becoming vocal, growling are left alone to calm down. Calming music is played.

### *Frustration*

The two causes of frustration are non-reward and improvised environment. Frustrated cats need to have more control over their environment. These cats are given stable and consistent routines including increased play therapy and socialisation sessions. Intense physical exercise sessions are provided to allow release of pent up energy – long runs, high jumps in play. Mentally stimulating activities are offered. If the cat has been assessed and was good with other cats, the cat is housed with other cats with similar energy levels. If they are housed singly they are given daily time out of their cages. Items to scratch on are provided. Too much hands on interaction with these cats is avoided, as they can become easily over stimulated and may scratch or bite.

### *Depression*

Depressed cats need extra attention. It is important to first ensure that the depression is not a sign of physical illness. Numbers of people directly interacting with these cats is kept to a minimum to allow them to bond with a familiar person. The best intervention for depressed cats is a foster home or adoption. If this is not possible cats are placed in areas where there is high activity to stimulate their environment. Peppermint oil or catnip are used to help stimulate these cats – a few drops on a towel placed in the cage. Hiding areas and boxes are removed, and comfortable open rest areas are provided to increase exposure to their environment and reduce depression. Interactive play therapy is given to help motivate these cats. High value foods are also offered to stimulate appetite and provide olfactory therapy.

It is extremely important to make daily observations of the progress within any intervention program to ensure that the program is correct for the cat.

## **The role of volunteers in the Behaviour, Enrichment and Rehoming program**

For many shelters and organisations there is not enough financial support available to allocate a staff member for every cat, therefore the success of this program runs partly on having a dedicated volunteer group. Areas volunteers assist in include undertaking monitoring, providing social enrichment and play therapy. Volunteers also bring possible homes and contacts for new homes.

The monitoring system is straight forward and easy to teach to volunteers. Volunteers interested in learning more about behaviour can also be trained in behavioural assessing and rehabilitation.

## **Rehoming and post adoptive support**

Responsibility for each cat does not end when the cat is rehomed. The successful rehoming process includes appropriate matching of cat to new home, training in the psychological care of the cat, as well as providing support during the time of adaption to one another. To ensure a successful long term match between family and cat, as much behavioural information as possible is collected on each cat. A rehoming profile is then created, including what new home would be most appropriate for the cat. This helps ensure the best match possible and reduce return or surrender rates.

The importance of recording daily behavioural observations on each cat cannot be overemphasised. This information can help make the difference between a successful adoption, and one that ends in the cat being returned. Each time a cat is returned, there is the possibility of long term psychological damage, and reinforcement of people's belief that animals are disposable. The approach of this program is to make people aware that a good match ensures a long term healthy relationship with the cat, and fosters respect for the individuality of each cat and their needs. For this reason people are offered the Fantastic Felines Program – an enrichment program to use in their homes with their newly adopted cats (can also be used with cats they currently have).

## **Fantastic Felines – post adoptive care**

The Fantastic Felines Program is a post adoptive program designed to strengthen the bond between human and cat by implementing environmental enrichment techniques that both cat and human participate in and enjoy. The main components of the program are:

1. Play
2. Food enrichment and environmental enrichment
3. Touch

The program is presented in interactive book form and can be offered to new families to work through on their own, or can be presented as an interactive training seminar.

The Behaviour, Enrichment and Rehoming Program outlined here is a comprehensive program to enhance the psychological welfare of confined cats. For further details on the program, training and for assessment and monitoring forms or copies of the Fantastic Felines book, please contact Tamzin Barber – [tbarber@talkinganimals.com.au](mailto:tbarber@talkinganimals.com.au). This has been a Talking Animals initiative.

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