

small for a scratching post or scratching pad, a cardboard hiding place can provide a substrate to scratch

SETTING UP A CAGE/PEN

Considered placement of appropriate resources in the cage/pen can reduce stress and distress in homing centres

- ◆ Ideally hiding areas should have two holes – if approached by a human from one access hole, the cat is less likely to feel trapped knowing it can exit the hiding area from the other
- ◆ The place to hide should be positioned where neither access hole is blocked by someone entering the cage/pen, or by any bowls or other items (Figure 5)
- ◆ In larger pens, food and water bowls can be positioned away from the door of the cage/pen to give the cat perceived safety to eat and drink away from the noise and activity of the homing centre
- ◆ Place the litter tray in a quiet and secluded area (probably at the back of the cage), ensuring it does not block entry or exit to the hiding place. If a hiding place is not provided, cats often use the litter tray, keeping low to hide below the sides
- ◆ Place soft bedding inside the hiding place and on the elevated area – if possible, use the cat's current bedding to ensure continuity of familiarity

COMMUNAL HOUSING

Although it is generally recommended that unfamiliar cats are housed singly, group housing may occur in some homing centres. Communal housing can also be beneficial for some cats, particularly those that are well socialised but are experiencing frustration due to confinement in small veterinary style cages. However, poorly designed communal rooms increase the risk of stress and



Figure 5. Suggested layout for a veterinary style cage with litter tray at the back (but not blocking the exit to the box) and the box slightly to the front with soft bedding and toys. In this example the food is attached to the door so that the cat can eat while sitting up high



Figure 6a. Marking provides scent security for cats. Therefore spot cleaning of cages/pens (where not every part is cleaned at the same time) will help maintain the perception of security by ensuring continuity of the cat's own scent within the cage or pen.

Figure 6b. If a cat is very distressed by a person cleaning the cage, the entrance to its hiding place (with the cat inside) can be covered while cleaning is undertaken

distress. Distress can manifest in different ways, including aggression, with the possible consequence of injuries to cats and staff.

Designing the communal area

To reduce distress in communal rooms, design and furnishing is vitally important to minimise opportunity for conflict. The best way to design a cat-friendly communal housing environment, is to consider it from the cats' point of view. Get on your hands and knees and, as you move through the environment to access important resources such as food, windows and resting areas, ask yourself these questions:

- ◆ Can I see the whole room when I am eating?
- ◆ Can I be approached from behind or jumped on while I eat?
- ◆ Can I get to the window, litter tray and food bowls without stepping over another cat's resting area?
- ◆ Can I be approached from behind or jumped on while in the litter tray?
- ◆ Do I have my own resting area where other cats do not need to jump over me to access their resting area (eg, directly above mine)?

Resting and sleeping areas in communal housing

- ◆ Potential conflict can be reduced by having several separated single shelves rather than one long shelf
- ◆ There should be more single size resting areas than the total number of cats in the enclosure
- ◆ Resting/sleeping areas should be at least 1 m (3 ft) apart



Figure 7. A corner shelf can help less confident cats as they are protected from behind and can see everything in front



Figure 8. Windows looking to the outside or into another room can be a valued resource for cats (although there may be a chance of redirected aggression if frustrated by activity outside)

- ◆ Corner shelves can help less confident cats to rest without the risk of being approached by another cat they cannot see (Figure 7)
- ◆ Windows looking onto the outside or into another room are a valued resource for cats (Figure 8)

Feeding areas in communal housing

- ◆ Avoid placing food bowls under or close to a resting area where a cat can be jumped on while feeding
- ◆ Place some food and water bowls slightly away from the wall (and apart from one another) so cats can watch the room while feeding (Figure 9)



Figure 9. In communal settings, placement of bowls slightly away from the wall allows cats to watch the room while feeding

Litter trays in communal housing

- ◆ As a rule, there should always be as many litter trays as there are cats, plus one. However, this is not practical for most confined spaces. Thus litter trays must be cleaned several times a day as most cats do not like using a soiled litter tray, particularly if soiled by another cat
- ◆ Avoid covered litter trays for communally housed cats. Conflict can arise if one cat decides to rest on top of the box or block the entrance and prevent

another cat entering or exiting the box

- ◆ Place litter trays in corners so that, when being used, cats can view other cats approaching (Figure 10)
- ◆ Do not place litter trays below or near shelves to avoid intimidation by cats towards the cat accessing the litter tray



Figure 10. Access to litter trays can be a cause of conflict

Opportunity for socialisation

- ◆ Some cats enjoy close proximity to each other (Figure 11), others will not (Figure 12). Provide at least one raised area, such as a bigger platform or a large shelf, where cats can socialise. This area should be accessible directly from the ground to avoid blocking by other cats
- ◆ There should be enough free floor space for cat-cat play, a scratch post(s) and items to rub on for cat-to-cat olfactory communication
- ◆ There should be enough space to include a sitting area for volunteers/visitors to spend time in the room

SELECTING CATS FOR COMMUNAL HOUSING

At a homing centre, frustrated cats should be considered first for group housing, but only if they are friendly to other cats. Cats that are withdrawn and appear depressed (those showing signs of learned helplessness) should not be placed in communal housing unless monitored very closely, as they are more prone to hide in corners and suffer physical and mental deterioration.



Figure 11. Some cats will enjoy proximity with each other



Figure 12. Some cats will not enjoy the presence of other cats

Cats selected for communal cat housing should:

- ◆ Be vaccinated and neutered
- ◆ Show no overt signs of anxiety/fear
- ◆ Show no signs of illness (particularly infectious disease)
- ◆ Be physically fit and able to jump to access higher shelves and resting places
- ◆ Ideally have a known history of living amicably alongside other cats
- ◆ Be assessed for socialisation to other cats prior to placement in the communal room. This is quite challenging as some cats can react to some cats and not others. Healthy cats can be placed in a large cage (with somewhere to hide) in a corner or against a wall in the communal pen and their response to other cats monitored. Cats showing behavioural signs of distress towards approaching cats should be removed. Often volunteers who have worked with the cats in single housing have noted their response to other cats nearby and this information should be utilised in the selection process

INTRODUCING CATS TO A GROUP IN A HOMING CENTRE

Communal rooms should include one or two introduction cages (equipped similarly to single cages). All cats entering the communal room should spend the first 24 hours in an introduction cage on their own. This gives all cats the chance to get accustomed to the sight and smell of each other and for homing staff to monitor their reactions. In general:

- ◆ Cats showing signs of distress, particularly anxiety/fear after the introduction period should not be released into the communal area
- ◆ Cats intimidating other cats with aggressive, stalking or blocking behaviour should be removed from the communal area
- ◆ Cats showing consistent avoidance of other cats should be removed

BEHAVIOURAL INTERVENTIONS TO MANAGE DISTRESS

Research has found that enriched, cat friendly housing, and both consistent and predictable animal care practices, are essential components of interventions to reduce distress and help cats have a positive (or less negative) perception of their environment. There are three principles of effective behavioural intervention:

- ◆ Identify and understand the underlying emotional state (both type and intensity) that may be contributing to distress. In order to do this effectively, daily assessment is required
- ◆ Identify the cause(s) of the negative emotions and address this in a way that positively enhances the welfare of the cat