

Containment of owned pet cats in Canberra – response from the Australian Veterinary Association ACT Division Committee

12 March 2015

Containment of cats is encouraged on the condition that adequate environmental enrichment is provided to meet the cats' physical and behavioural needs.

Background

The containment of cats in an enclosed area (within the owner's property boundaries) can have the advantages of:

- Helping to protect cats from injuries and diseases due to fighting between cats (abscesses, FIV, FeLV)
- Helping to protect cats from injuries due to dog attacks, car accidents and snake bites
- Increasing the opportunity for owner- cat interaction
- Reducing the impact on wildlife of hunting by cats
- Reducing disturbance caused to neighbours.

However, containment without adequate environmental enrichment may lead to physical and psychological restrictions and poor quality of life for cats. Cats that are unaccustomed to being contained may suffer distress if suddenly restricted. This may lead to development of behavioural problems which may increase relinquishment rates, both of which are undesirable from an animal welfare perspective. Lack of adequate exercise may lead to conditions such as obesity and diabetes.

Recommendations

Where cats are contained, steps should be taken to ensure that adequate exercise and environmental enrichment are available to provide sufficient physical and psychological stimulation.

Cats contained to an owner's property should have access to an outdoor escape-proof enclosure to provide activity and stimulation. These enclosures must not be electrified.

Ideally, cats should be trained to be contained early i.e. as young kittens. Young kittens that are raised within the owner's boundary (and have access to an outdoor enclosure) are less likely to suffer behavioural distress.

Environmental enrichment in the form of climbing structures, hiding areas, safe toys and scratching posts should be provided. A leash and harness may be used to walk cats outside the owner's property under direct supervision. Having two compatible pet cats living together can also help to provide company and environmental enrichment for contained cats. Talk to your veterinarian about desexing which will reduce the cat's desire to roam, and also the use of pheromone sprays and diffusers which can help to reduce stress in cats.

If new suburbs in Canberra introduce legislated cat containment it is important that potential residents are made aware of this requirement prior to entry. Support should be provided to help owners ensure the well-being of their contained cats, in the form of information and guidelines on appropriate enclosures and environmental enrichment.

For pre-existing suburbs, cat containment may be encouraged through educational campaigns which emphasise the need for concurrent environmental enrichment. However any introduction of compulsory requirements should follow an appropriate consultation and phase-in period to accommodate cats that are currently unaccustomed to confinement. These cats should be allowed to adjust through a gradual reduction in time spent beyond the property and provision of a suitable outdoor enclosure. Government support is recommended in the form of educational material and the provision of low cost affordable outdoor enclosures.

The AVA's policy on Cat Management in Australia can be viewed here:

<http://www.ava.com.au/policy/132-management-cats-australia>