Name: _____ Date: _____

A Predator at the Window

Reading level 13 · 1095 words

Ines's cat, Soot, spends most afternoons on the windowsill, tracking pigeons she can never reach. For a school project on animal welfare, Ines asked a question that sounded simple: is it fair to keep a hunter indoors? To answer it, she had to learn what a cat actually is. Archaeology and genetics suggest the domestication of the cat began in the Near East around 7500 BCE, long before anyone wrote a care guide. That means pet cats are not tiny lions, but they are not an invention of the last century either. They are an old partnership between a predator and a people, and Ines decided to judge it by evidence.

She started with the diet, because the rules are firm and the reasons are clear. A cat is an obligate carnivore, adapted to a low-fibre, highly digestible meat diet. Cats also cannot produce enough taurine, so they need it in their food. The ASPCA says taurine matters for heart and eye health, and the RSPCA states plainly that cats cannot be vegetarian. The rule is not a fashion. It follows from the way the cat's body works. On meal timing, though, the sources differ: the RSPCA says cats naturally eat several small meals a day, while the ASPCA recommends feeding twice a day with measured portions. Ines noted that a vet breaks the tie.

Next she read about the senses, and she found a disagreement worth reporting. Touch receptors called vibrissae grow on a cat's muzzle, eyebrows and elbows, and a reflective layer behind the eye, the tapetum lucidum, helps it see in low light. Wikipedia puts the result at about one sixth of the light a person needs. On hearing, however, the two sources Ines opened gave different ranges: the Animal Diversity Web says 50 to 65 kilohertz, while Wikipedia says 55 hertz to 79 kilohertz. Ines wrote that cats hear far higher sounds than people do, and left the exact limits out, because the sources would not agree.

The claws explained the furniture. A cat's claws are retractable, and they pull back into the paw so that they stay sharp while the cat walks. The RSPCA says that cats naturally use objects to scratch, mark territory, strengthen their muscles and sharpen their claws. So a scratching post is not a luxury. It is an outlet for behavior the cat cannot switch off. The ASPCA suggests a sturdy post at least three feet high that does not wobble, and nail trimming every two to three weeks. Ines noticed that the advice always gives the cat something to do instead of just telling it to stop.

The harder question was hunting. Kittens learn essential survival skills by watching their mothers, and the Animal Diversity Web says mothers actively teach their young how to hunt. A cat that has never needed to catch a meal still carries the drive. The RSPCA says that even well-fed indoor cats have a predatory instinct, and that playing with a cat for five to ten

minutes a day can reduce its hunting by 25 percent. Ines noticed the limit on that statistic: it describes hunting of wildlife, so it supports play as a substitute, but it does not prove that play replaces everything an outdoor life offers.

Then came the indoor-versus-outdoor argument, where respected sources lean in slightly different directions. The ASPCA says outright: keep your cat indoors, because outdoor cats do not live as long and are at risk from cars, fights, fleas, ticks and infectious diseases. The RSPCA says that road accidents are the most common cause of injury or early death in cats, and advises keeping cats in during busy times or overnight if they go out. Neither source calls outdoor life harmless. Ines concluded that the safest choice is indoors, with a stimulating home, and that a family who allows outdoor time should ask a vet about microchips and collars.

A stimulating home turned out to be central. The RSPCA says cats are intelligent and need both mental and physical stimulation, and that they sleep for many hours a day but need chances to exercise when awake. Wikipedia gives the sleep range as 12 to 16 hours. Ines wrote that a bored cat is not a lazy cat, because boredom is a welfare problem rather than a quirk. A window, a post, climbing places, hiding places and short daily play sessions were all things she could recommend, and she could point to a source for each one. She also noted that one of them, play, costs almost nothing and takes only a few minutes.

The next section was the one Ines found most sobering: cats are easy to misread. They hide when they are worried, and the RSPCA notes that spraying may be due to anxiety or stress. It also warns that changes may not be obvious, because cats show upset or pain in different ways. This is why the annual health check matters even when a cat seems well. The ASPCA adds a simple threshold for owners: if signs such as not eating, diarrhea, vomiting or low energy continue for more than two days, call the vet. Ines wrote that neither she nor a website can diagnose a cat, and that a child's job is to notice.

Welfare also includes the people in the house. The CDC says cat bites and scratches can spread germs, even when the wound does not seem serious, and that children should be supervised around cats. Hands should be washed after handling a cat, its dishes or its supplies, and after cleaning the litter box. People with weakened immune systems and pregnant women should not clean litter boxes if possible. Cats also like company on their own terms, and the RSPCA says not to force a cat into contact it dislikes. Ines found that safety for the cat and safety for the family turned out to be the same list.

Ines ended her report with the limits. Sources differ on timing for neutering, with the ASPCA saying by five months and the RSPCA saying before four months for female cats, so a vet decides. Captive cats are expected to live about fourteen years, according to the Animal Diversity Web, so the decision to adopt one is long, and a grown-up makes it. Her answer to the question was a careful yes: a cat can be kept indoors fairly, if the home is built around

what a hunter needs. Soot yawned on the sill. Ask a grown-up to look at Peabody Pets with you. You will find it at pet.peabody.kids.

Questions

1. Why does the book say a cat cannot be vegetarian?

A. Cats dislike vegetables
B. A cat's body needs meat and taurine from its food
C. Vegetables are too expensive

2. Why does Ines leave out the exact hearing range?

A. The two sources gave different numbers
B. Cats cannot hear well
C. She forgot to look it up

3. What does the 25 percent statistic show, and what does it not show?

A. It covers every cat and every danger
B. It describes less hunting of wildlife, not everything play offers
C. It proves cats should go outside

4. According to the ASPCA in the book, when should owners call the vet about signs of illness?

A. After a month
B. When signs continue for more than two days
C. Only if the cat is outdoors

5. In the book, what does "retractable" mean for claws?

A. Very long
B. Able to pull back into the paw
C. Easy to break

Words to know

domestication: taming over time
carnivore: must eat meat
taurine: needed nutrient
retractable: pulls back in
welfare: well-being

Answer key: A Predator at the Window

1. B. A cat's body needs meat and taurine from its food
2. A. The two sources gave different numbers
3. B. It describes less hunting of wildlife, not everything play offers
4. B. When signs continue for more than two days
5. B. Able to pull back into the paw