

Connections matter: the importance of social housing for enhancing animal health and well-being

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During the past several decades there has been an explosive increase in animal behavior research in captive and wild animal populations. This growing body of scientific investigation has focused on the basic mechanisms underlying animal behavior and its importance to the biology and psychology of a diversity of species. As scientific research leads to an increase in this understanding, so too does our ability to use this information to appropriately manage and enhance the captive animal experience. As a result of this evidence-based approach, a new type of expertise has emerged into what we now call “Behavior Management”, which many zoos, animal breeding colonies, and biomedical research institutions have embraced worldwide, particularly over the past two decades. One key aspect of this Behavior Management approach, which USDA legislation and AAALAC accreditation have increasingly recognized over the past several years, is the critical importance of appropriate socialization or social housing. That is *connections matter* not only for humans but all social species. Indeed, socialization and social housing has been deemed by numerous legislative entities as the most important aspect of any environmental enrichment program for social species. In this lecture, I will present a brief history of this perspective (and legislation) on social housing from its early foundations in addressing the psychological well-being of nonhuman primates to the current standards for all social animals under captive care. I will discuss the importance of early socialization and continued social housing to increase animal health and well-being in pair-housed, small group-housed and large group-housed animals living in biomedical facilities, farms, zoos and sanctuaries and how the lack of appropriate socialization and social housing can lead to poorer quality animals for human companionship, consumption or biomedical use. I will emphasize in maximizing animal health and well-being that conspecific social relationships are critically important but so too is the socialization that comes from positive human-animal relationships. Finally, I will discuss how other forms of environmental enrichment can be used to manipulate the social environment in ways that enhance the success of socialization and social housing programs.