



Winter Park Veterinary Hospital

55 YEARS *A Compassionate Commitment to Quality Pet Care*

EDUCATING CLIENTS TO PREVENT FELINE BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS

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KITTEN SOCIALIZATION

Kittens undergo a sensitive period of social development between 2 and 7 weeks of age, although important social learning continues for several weeks after this time. Exposure to other cats, various humans, and other species that one wishes the kitten to grow up to be comfortable with should occur frequently at this age. Experiences should be pleasant and non-frightening. Thus, all handling by children should be supervised. The best way to prevent later predatory behavior toward various "pocket pets" and birds is to raise kittens with these animals. It is during play with conspecifics and interactions with adult cats that kittens and juveniles learn the necessity of inhibiting their biting and scratching during play, and learn species-typical signals of submission and dominance. Most importantly, they learn species specific affiliative behavior and develop a preference for engaging in friendly social interactions, such as allogrooming, resting together, allorubbing and nose-touching with their own species. Kittens that are removed from the litter at a young age and do not encounter other cats for several months or years may respond to exposure to another cat with fright. They also will not know how to engage in friendly greeting behavior that could facilitate the development of amicable behavior.

PLAY

Playing is normal for cats. Providing cats with toys, playful interactions with human caregivers and feline playmates all help prevent the development of undesirable behavior by keeping a cat occupied with acceptable behaviors. Toys should be varied and rotated. As with human children, cats can lose interest in even the best of toys after a certain amount of playing with it. Human cat owners should regularly interact with their cat by throwing balls, throwing paper wads, dragging strings and engaging in other playful actions that allow the cat to play "predator" without engaging in undesired behaviors such as attacking ankles or good drapes. Finally, for a cat that is raised with appropriate socialization, other cats can be excellent playmates.

SCRATCHING

Scratching is a natural, normal behavior. Cats do not scratch the good furniture out of spite but because they have a need to scratch and find the good furniture to be a desirable substrate. Scratching serves multiple functions. The cat removes the outer sheath of its claws when grooming, keeping the claw sharp and effective for hunting. The cat also leaves scent and visual marks which may provide important signals to other cats and to the cat doing the scratching. An important piece of advice for owners of cats that are scratching objects the owners want them to leave alone is to look at what the cat is actually doing and using. Is the cat positioning itself vertically or horizontally to scratch? Is it scratching wood, carpet or coarse cloth? Is there anything notable about the location, e.g. beside a window where stray cats sometimes look in. If a cat is engaging in vertical scratching on the cloth of a couch that is covered in a coarsely woven cloth, providing it with a carpet covered scratching post or a box of cardboard strips may not answer the actual needs of the cat.

Instead, try to match the "scratching post" with what the cat is actually doing. In this case, a 4 X 4 post can be nailed upright onto crossbars to keep it steady. Then cover it with some foam padding and, finally, a piece of cloth that resembles the cloth the cat is already using as closely as possible. Place it near the location where the cat is already scratching. The cat can be encouraged to use the post by rubbing the post with catnip, or by playing with the cat around the post. As a general rule, look at what the cat is doing and try to mimic this with an object that is acceptable for the cat to scratch.

LITTERBOX MANAGEMENT

Inappropriate elimination is a very common behavior problem. However, the surprising thing is that it is not more prevalent. Cats did not evolve using gravel or other manufactured substrates, placed in plastic boxes in locations selected by another species. Likewise, they did not evolve seeking caves out to use as toileting areas. Instead, they evolved using open areas, forest soil and grasslands, for elimination. When one observes an outdoors cat, either domestic or feral, engaging in elimination behavior, it is obvious that they use a much larger area for searching, digging and elimination than is offered at the typical litter box. Following are some guidelines to help prevent the development of elimination behavior problems.

FIVE RULES OF PREVENTING INAPPROPRIATE ELIMINATION.

- 1. Offer a large box.** For the typical well-fed, 8 to 15 lb pet cat of today, even the largest commercially available box is not large enough. Offering these to your cat is like offering a toddler's training potty to your house guests. Many cope, but observing videotape of typical cats using standard sized litter boxes makes it obvious that they are cramped, especially in comparison with observations of cats eliminating outdoors. Until such time as litter box manufacturing companies begin offering much larger boxes, avoid boxes that are specifically marketed for this purpose. Instead, use larger plastic storage boxes such as those designed to store sweaters under beds or litter pans designed for small dogs.
- 2. Keep the box clean.** If you walked into a bathroom and there were urine and feces in the toilet and fecal matter spread on the seat, would you use it? Probably not. Yet cats are often expected to do just that by owners who find cleaning the litter box to be an unpleasant task that is best delayed. Cleaning the litter box is not a pleasant job, but it is an essential one. All litter boxes in the house should be checked and, if needed, scooped, at least twice a day. Change clumping litter weekly and non-clumping litter at least every two days. Do not clean the box with strong disinfectants, as residual odors may be left behind that humans cannot smell but the cat finds aversive. Instead, wash the box with water only or water and mild soap, then rinse well. Dry thoroughly. Some disinfection can be accomplished by leaving the box in direct sunlight for awhile, although if the cats are healthy this is not necessary.

3. Avoid hoods. As mentioned above, cats did not evolve using caves as toileting areas. The primary reason to use hoods is that cat owners do not like the sight and smell of feces and urine. For the best way to deal with that, see #2. While some cats do use hooded boxes, many cats avoid them. Typical hooded boxes have only one entrance/exit, and it is easy for a cat to be trapped in there by other cats or the family dog. In addition, hoods trap odors, and the cat is a species that has a better sense of smell than humans. If a cat owner insists on using a hood, it is essential that they cut a second opening in the hood and lift the hood to clean the box at least twice a day.

4. Make sure the cat likes the litter. Many litters are designed for human olfactory and visual preferences, not cats. Even for those litters that have been genuinely "cat tested", there are individual differences. Some cats simply dislike particular brands of litter.

We can see this by their behavior, even if they haven't yet resorted to eliminating elsewhere. They dig very little or not at all. They don't cover. They may stand with their paws on the edge of the box and they may shake their paws upon exiting, as if trying to get every last grain off their paw. Cats that like their litter dig vigorously and usually cover their excrement. If a cat engages in behaviors that indicate it doesn't like its litter, don't wait for it to start experimenting with other substrates. Start offering a litter cafeteria. This does not mean offering different kind of litters in sequence. It means offering two or more kinds of litter, side by side, at the same time. Keep a log of the cat's elimination patterns. In a multi-cat household, one cat may prefer brand X while another cat prefers brand Y. Even an individual cat may prefer brand A for urination and brand B for defecation. In these cases, it is important to offer all the various desirable litters. If a client doesn't know where to start in selecting a litter, a fine-grained, unscented litter substrate is the best place to start, as most cats prefer this. Cats that have been outside may prefer dirt to granular litter. In that case, potting soil may be used.

5. In multi-cat households, have enough litter boxes available and disperse them throughout the house. While humans may be willing to "wait in line" at the bathroom, cats will not necessarily always do so. If a box is occupied by one cat, another cat that needs to eliminate may just seek a non-litter box area rather than wait. In addition, social tensions in the household may manifest through more subtle mechanisms than overt fighting, including a high-ranking cat blocking access to the litter box by a low ranking cat. This is not possible if there are multiple litter boxes in multiple areas. Finally, it is difficult to keep one or two boxes in a multi-cat household sufficiently clean. Ideally, there should be as many boxes as there are cats, plus one more.

While following these rules will not entirely eliminate the possibility of inappropriate elimination developing, following

them will minimize the likelihood. Owners who follow these rules and still have problems should consult with their veterinarian.

INTRODUCING NEW CATS

While cats are social, their social groups are insular and strangers are not welcome. Under feral conditions, a cat attempting to immigrate into a group may have to hang around on the periphery for weeks, interacting with the group members one by one, until it is finally accepted. In this, they are very much like humans. Imagine if a government agent showed up at your door with a total stranger and expected you to take them into your home. You were to share your food, your bathroom, your space, your DVD player and everything else with them. You and your family would probably not welcome this stranger with open arms. That is because humans are a social species that forms distinct family and clan groups, similar to the cat. We do not indiscriminately welcome any and all other humans into our group, and neither does the cat.

Introduction of a new cat should be done gradually and, while it may sometimes require only a few hours or days, the owner of a group of cats who is attempting to introduce a new cat should expect it to take weeks. In the beginning, isolate the cats from each other behind closed doors. Bedding can be switched around so that the cats begin to become familiar with each others scents. Likewise, the owner can take small cloths, such as face cloths, and gently rub the cat around its head and neck. Make sure the cat is relaxed and appears to be enjoying this. These cloths can then be left in the other cats areas and even used to rub other cats in a similar fashion. If possible, proceed next to having a glass door or, better still, a screened door between the cats. With this in place, the cats can see and hear each other, and in the case of the screened door, smell each other. Encourage them to get close by placing delicious food near the door, but do not force interactions. If screened or glass doors are not an option, a regular door can be held slightly open with a wedge in the doorway and a piece of furniture making it impossible for the door to open more than an inch or two. Once the cats appear to be curious about each other, without exhibiting aggression, through this restricted access, they can be allowed to interact. Initial interactions should always be supervised.

THE TERRIBLE CARRIER

For many cats, the carrier means one thing, i.e. being locked in and carried to the veterinarians where unpleasant things happen. After two or three visits, the sight of the carrier is enough to make any cat run and hide, while getting the cat inside the carrier can be an unpleasant conflict in which the claws come and the cat makes clear its determination to never be forced inside its carrier again. This can be avoided by making the carrier a pleasant part of every day life. the carrier should always or, at least, frequently be left outside where the cat can enter it. Routinely leave treats in the back, or place new toys inside. Let the cat come and go as it pleases. Periodically, when there is time, close the carrier with the cat inside, then carry it around the house or even on a short ride during which nothing unpleasant happens. When the carrier is opened, give the cat a treat and have special play time.