

Cat: Correcting Your Cat's Behavior



What to Do with Your Cat's Unwanted Behavior?

There might be times when you find yourself at wit's end with some of your cat's unwanted behaviors. One might even want to punish a cat for less desirable behaviors; however, some of those behaviors might actually be just normal feline behaviors. With that in mind, it is important to recognize that these normal behaviors may need accommodations and management, changes in the environment, or simple behavior modification techniques to resolve most "problem" behaviors.

Some cats engage in problematic behaviors out of boredom such as lack of mental and physical stimulation. Similarly to a child where "negative" attention (such as being yelled at) is better than no attention at all, humans actually inadvertently reward unwanted behaviors. In this situation, the cat who is looking for some sort of response from the human might knock things off your dresser or scratch your furniture in hopes of gaining some attention from you.

Unfortunately, there is still plenty of outdated or just plain inaccurate information about how to punish cats for undesirable behaviors. Direct punishment should be avoided at all costs as direct physical punishment is detrimental to your relationship with your cat and can lead to fear and aggression. This includes spanking, pushing, scruffing and pinning down, swatting with a newspaper or other objects, nose tapping, or squirt bottles. Fearful as well as more confident cats might start hiding or become aggressive when direct punishment is used.

There are a variety of misconceptions about a cat's unwanted behaviors. Many people believe that their cat "knows" when they are being bad or are behaving in an unwanted manner out of spite. Another misconception is that cats and people share the same idea of unwanted behavior. Scratching furniture and playing rough are natural for cats but undesirable for people. Using direct punishment in these instances most likely will not punish the motivation of the behavior, causing the cat to associate the presence of her owner with being yelled at or otherwise punished. The cat will not associate the scratching of the couch with the punishment. Since scratching is a normal feline behavior, she will quickly learn that when you are not home she can happily continue with this pleasure.

However, this does not mean that we cannot set boundaries for our cats. Since we as humans have opposable thumbs and should have the ability to problem solve, we need to ensure that we provide cats with an environment that offers ample mental and physical enrichment to perform those natural feline behaviors in their appropriate areas. If they try something and have a good experience, they will do it again.

Encourage Good Behavior

- **Avoid and Manage.** Provide your cat with appropriate opportunities and deny access to problems zone if needed—see our handouts for how to use a scratching post, litter box use, playing with your cat, and mental enrichment.
- **Redirect, encourage, and reward good behaviors.** Use treats, attention, and play to encourage your cat to play and interact with his items.
- **Remote aversive.** Use upside down carpet runners, sticky tape, lemon rinds, tinfoil, scat mat, motion activated air cans, or other remote distractors to keep your cat off the furniture or areas you do not want your cat to have access to.