

Help, My Kitten is Driving Me Crazy!

Feline behavior problems can be a real challenge to correct, but with a little forethought and the right information, you can easily prevent most common problems. Many owners begin their relationship with a new pet armed with misinformation and an idealistic view of the pet-owner relationship. Individuals in the pet health care profession have many opportunities to help owners get off to a good start. We are here to help answer your questions about how to properly shape behaviors or handle problems with your new family member.

Socialization

Dogs and cats both have a critical period in their lives when they learn to interact with members of the same, and other, species. In dogs, that period is approximately between 4 to 12 weeks of age. In cats, it is approximately between 2 to 7 weeks of age. After these periods, their ability to develop confidence in interacting with other living beings gradually decreases. During the early months of life, puppies need to have as many positive experiences as possible with members of the same species and other species with whom they will live. Puppies need to be around humans of all ages and appearances in order to reduce the likelihood of shyness and fear aggression. It is important that owners without children provide adequate, supervised interaction with children of all ages. It is not uncommon for young couples to have problems when they start their family because the pet has never been socialized to children.

Rules for Training Young Pets

1. Don't take good behaviors for granted!

The best way for the pet to learn to do what the owner wants it to do is by rewarding it when it has done something acceptable. You should actively look for desired behaviors so that the pet can be praised. Verbal praise and a small, tasty treat are a great way to get your pet's attention!

2. Set the pet up to succeed!

Most kittens engage in quite predictable behaviors. They are active, inquisitive and get into everything. Young kittens tend to spend a good part of the time scratching things and scampering around, knocking objects off of shelves and counters. It is up to you to prevent mistakes by moving things out of reach and providing proper training. Close supervision or appropriate confinement may constantly be necessary during the first year of life. Ask your veterinarian or a Registered Technician with training in behavior if you have questions!

3. Be consistent!

The whole family needs to sit down and agree upon which behaviors are acceptable and which are not. It is very important that all members handle specific behaviors in the same way. If the family or an individual is inconsistent, the pet will be confused, learning will be delayed, and anxiety may result in serious behavior problems.

4. Avoid punishment!

You must understand that if you strike your pet, the consequences can be disastrous. Handshyness, fear biting, avoidance of humans, aggression and

submissive urination may all result from physical punishment. One of the most important things that the pet must learn is that the human hand is a friend. A loud, abrupt, semi-startling noise is adequate to interrupt an undesirable behavior by a young pet. To be effective, the noise must be given during the behavior, every time the behavior occurs, and needs to cause the pet to pause so that you can give a command ("come", "sit", etc.) in order for the pet to learn what it can do in order to earn praise from you! If necessary, you can use a shake can, air horn, whistle, or other device to cause the pet to pause. It is important that these devices only be used to briefly distract the pet and get his attention. These devices should never be used as punishment or in an attempt to instill fear or cause the pet to cower. Also, never use punishment in attempt to try to teach your pet what s/he should be doing. On the other hand, desirable behavior should always be reinforced.

For behaviors that occur when the owner is not present, environmental devices can be used to keep a pet away from areas where undesirable behaviors might occur. There are several commercial products available:

- Scatmat
- Scranimal
- Spray Barrier

Litterbox

We do not assume that all owners know about litterbox and housesoiling problems. First time pet owners, especially, need to learn to avoid indiscriminately changing between types of litter, that the box needs to be in an area with some privacy and that the box should be cleaned frequently without using a harsh-smelling disinfectant. We recommend close supervision or confinement to a small room with a litterbox for the first 2 to 4 weeks after the young kitten is adopted so that the pet gets off to a good start. If the kitten eliminates in an unacceptable area, the area should immediately be cleaned. Food bowls and toys can be placed over these areas to prevent resoiling. Motion activated alarms can also be used to protect certain areas. No punishment or scolding should ever be used.

Introducing to the Resident Cat

The owner may need instruction on how to introduce the new kitten to the resident cat. An initial week of isolation for the new kitten is smart from a behavioral and medical point of view. During the following week, the resident cat and the kitten should alternately be confined and allowed free run of the house at different times. The first introduction should be at opposite ends of the largest room in the house. Toys and treats can initially be used to distract the cats and keep them at a safe distance from each other. If nothing more than a little hissing and posturing occurs, their relationship will probably develop without more help from the family. As a precaution, family members should supervise when home and continue to separate for about two more weeks. Additional feeding and elimination stations should be provided in areas where a cat will not be trapped or surprised while using them. Kitty condos and towels on shelves and tops of furniture provide perching/resting areas, increase the total area of

the home and allow an older cat to avoid a rambunctious playful kitten. If chasing or fighting occurs, the pets should be separated and reintroduced at a later time, perhaps 12 to 24 hours later. The use of feline pheromones (Feliway) in the home may be helpful. Application should begin about ten days prior to the adoption if possible.

Socialization and Handling

Even though cats have been domesticated for hundreds of years, each new kitten that comes into our world must learn about humans. Kittens have a sensitive period in their lives during which they learn to interact with members of the same and other species. This period falls between approximately 2 to 7 weeks of age. After this period, the ability to develop confidence in interacting with other living beings gradually decreases. This is not to say that socialization is complete by two months of age only that it should begin before that time. Continued exposure to a variety of people and other animals as the pet grows and develops is an essential part of maintaining good social skills. Occasional "happy" car rides are also recommended in order to get your cat used to travel. During these brief excursions, it is always a great idea to offer tasty treats. It is also a good idea that you occasionally stop by your veterinarian's office and expose your cat to friendly faces and a pat. Many cats' only exposure to a car is during the yearly trip to the vet's office and they quickly learn to associate the car with stress and the unpleasantness of needles at the clinic.

During the early months of life, kittens need to have as many positive experiences as possible with members of the same species and other species with whom they will live. The experiences the pet has during this time will have a major influence on its developing personality and how well it gets along with people and other animals when it grows into adulthood. They need to be around humans of all ages and appearances in order to reduce the likelihood of shyness and fear aggression. Kittens that are inadequately socialized may develop irreversible fears, leading to timidity or aggression. It is important to note that families without children need to provide adequate, supervised interaction with children while the kitten is still young. It is not uncommon for young couples to have problems when they start their family because the pet has never been socialized to children. It is also extremely important that the kitten be exposed to various environments, situations (e.g., car rides) and auditory/visual stimuli during this time to reduce the fear of "the unfamiliar" that might otherwise develop as the pet grows older.

The family should be advised to frequently expose the young pet to all types of handling in the context of gentle play and social attention. Handling exercises should include gentle touching of the face, ears, feet, collar, skin and haircoat. Provided there are not signs of anxiety or resistance, the owner should gradually proceed to tooth brushing, grooming, lifting, nail trimming and handling all areas of the body. The kitten should also be taught to tolerate all approaches and handling by family members while it is eating or playing with a toy. A pet that is not accustomed to being handled may resist or become fearful or aggressive when handled by a groomer, veterinarian, trainer or child.

Any handling that leads to fear, resistance, threats or aggression must immediately be identified and discontinued. Training should then be undertaken to condition acceptable responses to these forms of handling. Whatever interaction that is

unsettling for the pet should be performed in a manner that is so mild and muted that no anxiety is elicited while the handler provides something highly desirable, such as a toy, food or calm talk. The length and intensity of the sessions should gradually increase.

Destructive Scratching-Cats

Teaching the cat to use a scratching post:

1. Find a post with a surface that the cat likes that is stable and tall enough for the pet. Besides commercial carpet-covered posts, try a fireplace log secured to a plywood base or a rope-covered post. Every time the pet approaches the post, toss a very small treat to it. When it touches the post, toss a bigger treat, and when it scratches give it several treats.
2. The pet should be within eyesight of a family member at all times. Whenever it starts to scratch furniture, the behavior can be interrupted with a water gun or toss a bean bag **near** (not at) it. The family member should not say anything or look at the pet when this is done. Anything that is exceptionally startling for the pet or elicits a fear response should be avoided.
3. Whenever the cat cannot be watched (out of the home, busy or sleeping), it should be confined to a room without objects that it will likely scratch except its scratching post. Once it is frequently scratching the post on its own, freedom without supervision can gradually be allowed.
4. To keep the pet from scratching furniture when the family is not present, one or more of the following can be tried:
 - a. Hang a motion detector alarm on the corner of the furniture.
 - b. Hang a towel over the side of the furniture with six empty aluminum cans on top of the towel. When the cat scratches, the cans will tumble down.
 - c. Attach balloons to the side of the furniture. Hang a short ribbon on each balloon so the cat will swat at the ribbon and pop the balloon.
 - d. Cover the furniture with plastic or canvas drop cloths.
 - e. Attach a tissue with a strong citrus fragrance or cologne to the side of the furniture.
 - f. Apply double-sided sticky tape to problem areas.

Soft Paws can also be applied to toenails and used during the training period to cover the cat's nails and protect furniture. Talk to your veterinarian or Registered Technician if you have questions or are considering this.

Destructive Chewing and Ingestive Behavior

Cats that chew or suck on objects may cause costly damage to the household or serious injury to themselves. Kittens are highly investigative and tend to chew or ingest many household objects. At 5 to 6 weeks of age, some kittens may even begin to eat their own litter. Kittens given freedom to wander through the home and explore unsupervised can damage many of the owner's possessions. They can become obstructed or seriously injured when they chew on string, thread, latex, rubber and electric cords. Indoor cats with little or no access to grass or other vegetable matter may chew houseplants.

Fabric chewing by some cats may also be a form of compulsive behavior. Although sucking or chewing on fabrics can occur in cats of any lineage, there appears to be some genetic predisposition for this type of activity since Siamese and Burmese cats are especially prone to this type of behavior. Wool is most commonly chewed, followed by cotton, and then, synthetic fabrics. Rubber, plastic, wood and cardboard may also be chewed. The damage done by these cats can be quite extensive. The behavior usually arises during the first year of life, commonly between 4 and 12 months of age. Some cats will show an increase in pica between 6 and 18 months and about 2 months after rehoming.

Treatment for young cats with destructive chewing problems involves keeping the chewed objects away from the cat, teaching the cat to avoid areas where it might find objects to chew, making targeted objects taste bad, and providing the pet with its own chewing alternatives. Cat activity centers and interactive play toys can keep some cats distracted.

Cats that chew on plants may find them particularly appealing because of their taste or texture. Supplying the pet with lettuce, catnip or access to an herb garden may reduce chewing on houseplants. Providing alternative oral stimulation in the form of dog chew toys, rawhide and chewy foods (bulky, dry) might satisfy the desires of some cats. Applying a little meat spread, cheese or fish oil to the toys might help pique the pet's interest. Feeding sessions can be made more natural if the cat is provided with a means for searching for food. By offering small meals in a variety of locations, or requiring some form of manipulation to obtain food (feeders that deliver food when the cat interacts with them, toys or play centers with food inside), feeding can become a much more active and productive part of the cat's day.

Environmental punishment using taste aversion or booby-traps may be necessary to deter cats that develop fixations for household items. A plant's leaves can be lightly sprayed with water, and then sprinkled with cayenne pepper. Commercial sprays with an adverse taste can also be used to coat objects to discourage chewing. Motion activated alarms can be placed near the plants to chase the cat away when it approaches, or hidden under fabric items that the pet chews. Balloons can be tied around the base of larger plants or trees, so that when the cat plays with them they pop. The best chance of preventing destructive chewing in cats is to provide them with acceptable chew toys and interactive forms of exercise when they are kittens, and by avoiding anything that might chronically stress the pet.

Play Aggression

The most common type of aggressive behavior that cats exhibit toward their owners is a form of play. Young cats or kittens are most frequently presented for this problem. Kitten play typically involves elements of predation (stalking, chasing, attacking, catching and biting), exploration and investigation. Play objects are often swatted, pounced on and bitten. Bites tend to be inhibited and swatting is done with retracted claws. Sometimes, the pet will arch its back and hop sideways toward the play object. It is important to note that vocalizations are rare compared to other forms of feline aggression.

Problems with the owners are likely to occur if the kitten is the only pet at home and the owner is out of the home most of the day. Most kittens engage their peers in

rough and tumble play. When feline playmates are not available, they are likely to engage humans in similar activities. Damage is usually minimal but may be serious if the owner has fragile skin, an immune-suppressive disorder or if the play attack is directed toward the face. Owners may contribute to the problem by playing with kittens in a way that encourages attacks toward hands or feet.

This is one of the few behavior problems for which a second pet might be recommended. A second cat of the same age and temperament will usually solve the problem by satisfying the pet's need for active play. The owner should be told to stop engaging the cat in rough play. It is important that the cat have an acceptable outlet for this normal behavior. Interesting toys and interactive play should be provided. Ping pong balls and walnuts will provide inexpensive entertainment for many kittens. All chase and attack behaviors should be directed away from the owner. Play interaction with the cat should involve tossing or dangling toys for the cat to chase and catch. Physical punishment such as swatting the pet on the nose should be avoided since this may cause the pet to either fear the owner or encourage rougher play. A blast of air from a compressed air can directed near (but not directly at the pet), a water gun or an audible or ultrasonic alarm may be successful in discouraging the behavior.

Problems with other cats in the home occur when the object of play is another cat that is weak, fearful or old, and cannot tolerate the young cat's playful behavior. The pets should be kept separate unless the owner is supervising. A water gun can be used to discourage exuberant play directed toward the passive or reluctant cat. However, this can also lead to the younger cat's associating the older cat with the unpleasant stimulus. This can lead to aggression and would be a more difficult situation to deal with than an overly playful kitten. The owner should provide appropriate toys and playtime to help satisfy the young cat's need for play. Elevated resting areas can provide the older cat with a safe area to avoid the young pet. Sometimes, the cat that is bearing the brunt of the play attacks becomes so stressed that anxiolytic medication may be needed.

Remember that your veterinary staff is here to serve you and your pets! Please call if you have any questions regarding behavior and your pet!