



Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA

Solving Common Problems

Is your cat attacking you, your furniture and invisible mice? Is she bouncing off the walls and ceiling and knocking things off counters? Stealing, carrying around, or hiding the most unusual objects? Don't worry, your cat is normal. Much of this obnoxious behavior is instinctive, natural play and predatory activity. This happens with lonely, bored cats who have an excess of energy and no outlets. They cannot chase real mice and birds, or climb real trees, so they develop other habits to entertain themselves.

Treatment

Many problems can be prevented or cured by providing games, exercise, and entertainment. Get on the floor and play with her. Don't just toss her a toy and expect her to play by herself. Tie a toy to the end of a string, toss it down the hall and reel it in, or slowly drag it across the floor. This gives kitty a moving target to chase and attack. Put a bird feeder outside a window so your cat can watch hummingbirds divebomb the fuschia bush (see *Training sheet* for more ideas).

Sometimes kitten behavior, such as suckling and kneading, continues into adulthood. Provide your cat with something safe of his own towards which he can direct this behavior. If the cat decides to use you or your clothing for this activity, let out a short high-pitched yelp to let him know you disapprove. Teach him "yes" by encouraging kitty to indulge himself with his own special suckling/kneading pillow or blanket.

A cat's misbehavior is often reinforced by your unintentional rewards. The cat suddenly nips your ankle and runs off. You scream and chase him. Although you think you are reprimanding the cat, he probably thinks you are playing this is a fun game with him. Cats can also become pests, demanding attention and affection because when they come over to bug you, they get what they want -- food, attention or affection.

FURNITURE SCRATCHING

A cat has retractile claws to be kept sharp for hunting, fighting, and climbing. Nonetheless, a cat

needs to periodically condition his claws. Claws on the forepaws are conditioned by scratching, which removes the old layers of the nail. Cats keep their hind claws trim by chewing off worn parts. Scratching is also a marking behavior.

Treatment

Cats need their claws for protection. **You** may know that your indoor cat will never have to climb a tree in order to escape from the neighbor's Chihuahua, but your cat doesn't know it. Declawing makes cats feel insecure and defenseless. It is radical and inhumane to cut off body parts (the first joint of each finger) to prevent a simple behavior problem. In addition, declawing destroys one of the cat's most enjoyable activities -- climbing. It is natural for cats to scratch; and it is unfair and inhumane to punish a cat for acting like a cat. The major aim of these exercises is to redirect the cat's normal scratching behavior to an appropriate object -- a scratching/climbing post.

Prevention

One good scratching session can ruin an armchair. Until the cat can be trusted not to scratch and claw the household furniture, he should not be given free run of the house. Alternatively, if the cat has a single favorite scratching site, this may be temporarily protected by covering it with some net or loosely woven fabric such as tulle. Cats do not like to snag their claws.

Setting up for success

Your cat needs to scratch and climb. These activities are part being a cat. It's possible to teach the cat to limit his scratching to specific objects. Provide you cat with a variety of scratching posts. Most cats scratch immediately after waking, while performing a variety of stretching and calisthenic exercises. So place a scratching post close to each of his favorite sleeping areas. You can buy a post at a pet supply store, or you can build one. Cats do not require expensive climbing paraphernalia. Rough-hewn 4 x 4s set vertically or at about a 45-degree angle are appealing to many cats. Whether buying carpet to cover homemade posts or purchasing a finished article, take along a comb to make sure there are no



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loops in the carpeting which will snag the cat's claws. You can also attach the carpeting underside-up, as the backing has a rough texture that cats like. A bark-covered log or a straw mat make a good horizontal scratching post. Minimize damage to furniture by trimming your cats nails regularly. The sheet titled "Understanding Declawing" explains nail clipping (instead of removing them and part of their fingers permanently).

Rewards

In addition to providing posts, take time to teach your cat that these objects are intended as the sole site for his scratching and climbing activities. As soon as he wakes from a nap, call him to his post. Scratch the post from a point a few feet off the floor. Your cat will probably reach up and stretch his front paws on the post. Praise him profusely, especially if he makes scratching motions. Make the post enjoyable. Put an occasional food treat on it. Don't try to physically force him to scratch by holding his paws; he will probably resist and may dislike the post. Instead,

use lures and rewards. You can even train your cat to climb his post on command. Stand by the post with a treat in hand. Give a command (request) such as "Kitty, climb," or "Up, up and away!" Give him the treat if he comes running. If he walks in a slovenly fashion, or remains aloof and recumbent elsewhere, wait until he is a little hungrier, and repeat the procedure. Once he shows interest in coming over to the post, give the command again and place another treat on the lowest platform. Next time, place the treat on a higher platform, and so on. You will see how smart cats are and how quickly they learn.

Boobytraps

Once the cat clearly understands that you are overcome with joy when he claws or climbs his posts, you can show him that scratching your furniture and drapes is wrong. You must teach what is right before teaching what is wrong. A simple way to discourage your cat is to boobytrap forbidden articles. Our sheet titled "Boobytraps" gives examples for making furniture-scratching unenjoyable to your cat.

For more info, call our free Behavior Helpline (650/340-7022 x783 or, for Spanish, x786) or consider a low-cost consultation. To make a consultation appointment, call 650/340-7022 x667. The PHS/SPCA Behavior Department, like many shelter programs, is funded by donations.