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Destructive & Annoying Behaviors in Cats

I know that advising pet owners to keep their cats indoors is the best advice, but how can I help them deal with destructive and annoying cat behaviors?

Cats are naturally inquisitive animals and, when kept indoors without proper enrichment and activities, they may engage in behaviors that their owners find problematic. These include jumping on counters, destructive behaviors, attention seeking, aggressive play behaviors, nocturnal activity, and excessive vocalization.

Assess Home Environment

The first place to start is to assess the home environment to see if adequate time and resources have been provided for normal feline activities. The cat should be provided with fun, lightweight movable toys that are rotated on a regular basis. Climbing towers and scratching posts are essential to redirect the cat to appropriate areas for their normal exploratory and marking behaviors. Time should be scheduled each day for play and social interaction including petting, grooming, and if the owner is so inclined, training. Litter box maintenance and locations should also be discussed with the owner especially when there are multiple cats in the home.

Enticing Countertops

Jumping on counters is a common cat owner complaint. A cat may jump on the counter to explore, seek food, catch a mouse, escape another pet, or use it as a resting area. Often the cat is enticed to the counter by something rewarding: a view out a window, food, attention, escape from a problem situation, or interesting objects such as string and plants.

Addressing the cat's motivation is the first step in treatment. Providing alternate perches, keeping food off the counter, providing a safe area, and scheduling daily play and attention time are very useful interventions. In some cases, making the countertop aversive with double-sided tape, motion activated alarms, scat devices that release compressed air when a beam is broken, or cookie sheets with water in them all may deter the cat. Direct interactive punishment must be avoided since it may cause redirected aggression, fear, or anxiety directed toward the owners.

Inappropriate Climbing

Destructive behaviors often occur when the cat or kitten climbs onto areas such as curtains or bookshelves, or knocks items off locations in exuberant climbing and play behavior. If the problem occurs primarily when the pet is alone, creating a safe "cat-proof" area for the cat when unsupervised may help, and providing carpeted climbing frames or kitty condos is a good strategy. Enriching the environment and interaction with the cat so that vigorous, but appropriate, aerobic play takes place is very beneficial. Interactive play with the owner should occur with toys that bounce, flutter, and move to entice the cat to chase and jump. Avoid toys that are small enough to be ingested such as yarn or string. While a cat may tire of a toy after a short time, substituting a new toy will often encourage play



to resume at the previous high level.¹ Feeder toys that require the cat to move them to get food can keep a cat occupied for long periods. Again, physical reprimands are inappropriate and can cause other problems.

Persistent Attention Seeking

Attention-seeking behaviors often occur in kittens or cats that spend long periods alone. These usually include vocalization, pawing, jumping, stealing, and weaving in and out of the owner's legs. Attention seeking can be part of other behavioral disorders or can occur on its own. A good behavioral history may be needed to determine how extensive the problem is and whether other behavioral disorders such as anxiety, compulsive disorders, cognitive decline, and lack of consistent interactions are also present. If those are diagnosed through a behavioral history, other treatment modalities including medication may be necessary.

In some cases, attention-seeking behavior may signal a medical problem that is causing pain or

continues

anxiety; therefore, a good physical examination is suggested. If the problem is simply attention seeking, a few changes may diminish the occurrence of the behavior. The first step is removing all reinforcement for the behavior including eye contact, talking to the pet, and mild verbal reprimands. Attempts to attract attention by vocalizing, pawing, running, or other behaviors must be ignored. The pet should be given attention for being calm and quiet such as resting silently nearby or playing with its toys. Creating a reliable and consistent environment, so that the pet knows when it will be fed, groomed, played with, and petted, is useful. Once the cat has had such attention, typically it will be satiated and quiet for an extended period.

Nighttime Annoyances

Nocturnal activity is particularly annoying to owners since they often become sleep deprived due to the noise and persistent awakening. The cat may be seeking attention, access to another location, food, or play. Medical problems such as pain, endocrine dysfunction, cognitive

changes, or other metabolic disorders may make it difficult for the pet to sleep through the night.

If medical problems are suspected, then a physical examination, blood analysis, and other laboratory testing may be necessary to determine the cause of the problem so that appropriate treatment can be started. In some cases, simply confining the pet in another location at night will allow the owner to sleep. This location should have food, water, a litter box, interactive toys, and resting areas. In other cases, providing play and activity early in the evening may help satisfy the animal so that it will sleep through the night. The owner must also avoid responding to the pet at night with food or attention since this will only serve to strengthen the nocturnal activities.

Crying for Attention

Excessive vocalization is a common owner complaint. Crying can occur as an attention-seeking behavior; may signal distress due to anxiety, pain, or discomfort; or may be the result of cognitive

decline. A thorough behavioral history and physical examination should help determine the cause for the vocalization and lead to treatment recommendations. If the problem is attention seeking, the treatment described earlier is often useful.

Benefits of Enrichment

Helping owners to provide an enriched environment and daily interactive time will often prevent or treat annoying and destructive behaviors in household cats. Most destructive and annoying behaviors are normal cat behaviors presented in a manner that is problematic for the owner and usually resolve with the proper intervention and do not need medication. Ongoing problems of vocalization, destruction, or excessive activity may be clinical signs of other behavior problems and may require more in-depth behavioral and medical histories to determine appropriate interventions including medication. ■

See Aids & Resources, back page, for references, contacts, and appendices.

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