



Pet Behavior Counseling

Helping you and your pet become best friends for life.

CATS & "INAPPROPRIATE" SCRATCHING

Just like dogs need to chew, cats need to scratch; however, we often find this scratching to be inappropriate because it can damage our furniture and home. This handout discusses how to manage and deal with your cats inappropriate scratching while still giving them an acceptable outlet for this very important cat behavior.

The Changing Role of The Cat

Over the past several decades, people's perception of cats in the United States has dramatically changed. It was not too long ago that cats were mostly relegated to the outdoors or the barn, and they rarely received the level of care and attention that they do today. Cats have surpassed dogs as the number one pet in the country and 37 percent of homes have at least one cat residing in them. Today, there are roughly 60 million cats living as pets in the United States.

There seem to be two types of pet guardians; those that are true cat lovers and those who want a pet that they believe will require little effort and still yield big rewards. Unfortunately, too many people fall into this second category and erroneously assume that having a cat requires little to no work and are troubled when their pet develops habits of which they do not approve. All too often people decide on getting a cat because they want a pet they can play and cuddle with, but a dog is too much effort or too expensive so they opt for a cat in the belief that cats are easier to care for and cheaper to maintain. While this may be true on many levels, it is a false assumption that being a good cat guardian will be a piece of cake and be inexpensive. As with all relationships in this world, we reap what we sow.

When we started bringing cats into our homes there were some huge benefits to both species. Cats were more apt to get routine exams from veterinarians and our blood pressure dropped when petting our cats. Cats were less exposed to disease and thus so were we. Whether or not the cats diet improved is up for debate depending upon your view of eating a raw carnivorous diet versus a diet loaded with carbohydrates (for those of you who do not know, cats are obligate carnivores). Cats now also had the luxury of our furniture, and this is where one problem commences...

Scratching & Destruction

Many cats are surrendered to shelters and humane societies every day because of destructive behavior in the home. One of the most common complaints from cat clients is that their cat is scratching the carpeting, furniture or molding in their home and destroying their valuable items. What people need to understand is that, while upsetting to us, cats have a natural, instinctual need to scratch and that cats have no concept of value in a monetary sense. They only know what surfaces appeal to them to use for their scratching needs.

Cats scratch for a variety of reasons. They scratch to mark their territory visually; leaving obvious scratch marks, and also scratch to leave their scent. They scratch for physical reasons such as conditioning their claws and for stretching purposes. Some animal behaviorists also believe that cats scratch as a means of communicating happiness and seeking attention. What is critical is that we accept this as a normal feline behavior and rather than attempt to extinguish this behavior, it is our responsibility to redirect it to suitable objects. If we simply punish the cat for scratching without providing an appropriate outlet, all we will do is teach our cat not to trust us and not to scratch in our presence. This is also very likely to make our cat very anxious, potentially creating even more behavior problems. A good breeder will be sure that kittens are given proper scratching posts and will prevent the kittens from having access to scratching carpeting and furniture in an effort to instill good scratching habits. We cannot take the scratching out of the cat. Even cats that have been declawed still go through the motions of scratching.

A Note on Declawing

Declawing a cat is an elective surgery of convenience. It involves not only the removing of the cat's claws, but also the removal of the mechanism that extends the claw. This entails the severing of the joint and tendon as well as the destruction of both motor and sensory nerves. Declawing a cat is the equivalent of cutting a human finger off at the first knuckle. This particular surgery often causes the cat a week or more of post-operative pain and many veterinarians elect to keep the cats overnight due to the risk of complications. In 1994, a study was done by Washington State University College of Veterinary Medicine that looked at 163 cats that had been declawed. This study found that approximately 50 percent had one or more complications immediately following surgery and that 20 percent had continued complications. These complications involved hemorrhaging, infection, pain, and regrowth of nail. Some also believe that cats that are declawed are more likely to suffer from behavioral problems and are more apt to resort to biting when threatened or scared.

Additionally, cats that are declawed do not have the ability to defend themselves or climb should need be. Many people justify the declawing of their cat by indicating that they keep them indoors, but even indoor cats can and do escape. It is also not uncommon for people that have cats to want to obtain a dog at some point in the future, and thus they leave their cat defenseless in its own home. Others justify declawing their cat by only having the front claws removed so that the cat can still climb, however these cats cannot climb as effectively and if there is no tree present they remain defenseless. Declawed cats also cannot use scratching as a form of grooming and removing dead hair, particularly from around their neck and face region.

Some countries more advanced in animal welfare, the United Kingdom being one, have outlawed declawing cats except for medical reasons. Many veterinarians in the US will refuse to declaw a cat for ethical reasons.

How to Teach Appropriate Scratching

Cats often scratch and stretch when they wake up so this is a time that you should be particularly vigilant and be prepared to redirect and reward.

It is important when trying to teach a cat to scratch a particular object that we pay attention first and foremost to the cat's preferences. If a cat likes to scratch the carpet, a log may do you no good. For those cats that prefer molding a log would be ideal. Furthermore, the scratching post must be in an area the cat frequents to be of any benefit. It should be tall/long enough for the cat to fully stretch on and secured so that there is resistance when the cat scratches. Some different items you may try are posts, logs, wood, cardboard, pieces of carpet and sisal. Additionally, some cats like to scratch surfaces that are horizontal while others prefer to scratch vertically or on an incline.

If your cat has a tendency to scratch a particular corner of the sofa, place the new post beside that corner and rub some catnip on it to entice your cat. You should also encourage your cat to come and investigate its new post with a cat toy. At the same time cover the sofa corner with some double sided stick tape or aluminum foil, both surfaces that most cats dislike. When your cat scratches its post, reward with a small treat. Gradually, over the course of several weeks, you can move this post to a different location in that room should you desire. Once the cat is racing in and going to its scratching object you can begin to remove the foil or tape from your sofa. Do not forget to continue to reward your cat for scratching in the appropriate area and to regularly treat the post with catnip.

If it is the carpet your cat scratches you can do the same as above, however you do not want to use a piece of rug that is identical to what is on the floor. Your cat needs to be able to differentiate between the carpets. You should place double sided stick tape or aluminum foil on pieces of cardboard and lay these on the carpet until your cat is conditioned to go to their one area. As your cat gets good about knowing where to go, you can gradually remove the pieces of cardboard from your floor one at a time. Okay, so your home will look a little bizarre for a while, but isn't this preferable to putting your cat through the loss of parts of its anatomy?

Other Things You Can Do

You can also decrease unwanted damage by keeping your cat's nails trimmed. This will not diminish your cats desire to scratch, but will simply lessen the destruction. Use only nail clippers designed for animals as human nail clippers have a tendency to crush the nail. The typical cat has 5 nails on the front feet, including dew claws, and 4 nails on the back feet. Some cats however may have up to 7 nails on the front paws, so be sure you get them all. When cutting a cat's nails, you will need to press gently on the foot to expose the nails and then cut the nail below the quick. For most cats, the quick is easy to see as often their nails are white or clear. You do not want to cut into the quick because this will cause pain and bleeding. If you are unsure about doing the nail trim by yourself, ask your groomer or veterinarian to assist you the first time.

Additionally there is a product on the market called Soft Paws. These are vinyl nail caps which cover the cats claws thus preventing damage when the cat scratches. They remain on the paws for 4 to 6 weeks and fall off with the natural growth of the cat's nails. They are applied to the nails with a non-toxic adhesive. It is imperative however, that cats wearing these are not outside because while the cat still has nails, they remain defenseless in an attack and would not have the ability to climb.

Resources

Spadafori, G. & Pion, P.D., Cats for Dummies, IDG Books Worldwide, Foster City, Ca., 1997
(While the above book has some good advice about cats, it also contains some very bad information about dogs)

<http://avma.org/onlnews/javma/apr03/030415c.asp>

<http://www.cfa.org/health/declawing.html>

<http://www.SoftPaws.com>

<http://www.xmission.com/~emailbox/trivia.htm>