

DESTRUCTIVE and ANNOYING BEHAVIORS in CATS

Cats are naturally inquisitive animals who love to explore. When kept indoors without enough activities to keep them busy and occupied, they may engage in activities their owners find annoying or problematic. These include jumping onto kitchen counters, destructive behaviors, attention seeking that drives owners crazy, aggressive play, nighttime activities that keep owners awake or excessive meowing.

To help avoid problems, cats should be provided with fun, lightweight movable toys. There should be enough different ones that you can hide some away and rotate out new ones on a regular basis, so the cat doesn't get bored with the same two toys month after month. Active playtime with their owners is very beneficial – set a timer or play with your cat during an entire sitcom or movie. A few minutes is not sufficient, any more than it would be for a small child. Wear the kitten or cat out!

Climbing towers and scratching posts are essential, even for declawed cats. Cats love to climb and should be allowed to do so where they can't hurt themselves. We treat many injuries a year in kittens or cats who tried to jump from too high up – a closet shelf, refrigerator or stair banister, for example. Provide places for cats to perform gymnastics in a safer way.

Jumping on counter tops is a common client complaint. Often there is something enticing up there: food, a view out a window, attention, escape from another household pet, or interesting objects such as string or plants. Again, provide appropriate alternative perches such as window shelves or scratching towers. Keep your cat busy with other things to do. Keep food and other enticements off the counters. Don't attempt to punish your cat except perhaps with a squirt bottle of water. Cats don't respond well to negative training methods, tending to become aggressive or timid but not to learn much from the experience. In addition, when you only prevent access to the counters when you are home the cat soon learns simply to wait until you are not there.

If these things don't work, it's time to try an intervention. There are many ways to make the counters unattractive to cats. Laying sheets of aluminum foil or cookie pans with water in them on the counter can be effective. Double sided sticky tape feels icky to cats' feet but may be difficult to peel back off. This solution

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works better for padded furniture being damaged by scratching than for

countertops but you could try it. Commercial products are available to help with this too, including motion sensor air horns and ones that emit puffs of air that cats don't like. "Scat Mats" are available through catalog and on-line sources. These produce a mild electric shock tingle when walked on. mouse traps set upside down under newspapers will make a sudden, scary snapping and rustling effect that deters cats but it can also lead to pinched toes.

Cats are often destructive when they climb onto bookshelves or dressers and knock things off, or when they climb screens, blinds and curtains. If this primarily occurs when you are away from home, keep the culprit confined to a cat proofed area when you are not there. Again, provide something else for the cat to do, don't just deprive it of all stimulation or activities. You'll just have a nighttime beast when you return if you don't provide an outlet for natural play. If you provide enough play and exercise time, the problem will diminish, and kittens do outgrow this tendency for the most part. Try feeder toys that require the cat to move them in order to get food, hiding kitten food bowls where they can be "discovered" or run madly through the house dragging a piece of ribbon – whatever works!

Attention seeking behaviors include vocalization (incessant meowing), pawing, jumping onto their humans, stealing objects or knocking them to the floor, weaving in and out of the owner's legs or pitifully moaning by the food bowl until someone rewards them with food – thus perpetuating the problem. There is nothing so difficult as ignoring these behaviors until they go away, and punishment rarely helps. If the cat begs and pesters for food, try getting an automatic feeder so that you are not the one who doles it out. The cat will then pester the feeder instead of you! If it's not food related we are back to the same old advice – play with your cat constructively so it has less energy for being naughty.

In order to extinguish an unwanted behavior it is necessary to remove all attention from those behaviors. In other words you must ignore them when they happen. Don't make eye contact with the cat, or talk to it or reprimand it. Give attention instead when the cat is NOT doing the wrong thing. If it is sitting quietly or playing with toys that's when you should be interacting with and rewarding the cat, with praise, treats, play or petting. Create a reliable and consistent environment, so the pet will know when it will be played with, petted, fed and groomed. When it can count on your undivided attention at certain times the cat will be quieter and more contented in between.

For nocturnal activities, simply confining the cat outside of the bedroom may be effective. Provide food, water, a litter box and of course toys. Providing play activities in the evening and upon rising in the morning may be helpful. Avoid responding to the pet at night with food or attention, as this will perpetuate the behavior.

Remember that cats need and deserve companionship from their owners and they are sad and lonesome when they don't get it. We have a client who left her

cat alone for months while on a sabbatical. The poor pet sitter was being attacked when she tried to leave the house, the cat was so upset over being left alone week after week. Solitary confinement is cruel for both human beings and pets.

Some cats will be more vocal or seek attention when something is wrong. Pain, illness, high blood pressure and senility can all lead to excessive vocalization. A thorough physical examination and blood testing are appropriate if the behavior is new or worsening. Behavioral medication is sometimes helpful.

Most destructive or annoying behaviors are normal cat behaviors that are problematic for the owner. Remember that cats normally are semi-nocturnal, hunting usually at dawn and dusk. They cannot change their normal sleep rhythm just because it keeps us awake. They are predatory hunters who use play to sharpen their hunting skills – it's natural behavior for them to pounce on things or bat them around. They don't know that their behavior is annoying – to them it's natural and appropriate. That's why punishment is so counterproductive and ineffective. You can't break an instinct easily. Kindness and redirecting to more appropriate patterns of play and routine are by far more effective, and don't harm the precious bond between you and your cat.