

GUIDELINES FOR SOLVING YOUR CAT'S BEHAVIOR PROBLEM

Pam Johnson-Bennett, CCBC

You don't bring a cat home with the expectation of having behavior problems. A cat comes into your life with the hope of being a beloved member of the family. Sometimes though, problems do develop where the cat displays unwanted behavior. If it happens, you become confused about the cause of the sudden change. If not dealt with correctly, it can also damage the bond you share with your cat and it certainly creates stress for everyone in the home.

If you find yourself dealing with unwanted behavior, it's crucial to find the underlying cause. Don't assume a cat is mad at you, trying to get even or displaying a particular behavior out of spite. Every behavior a cat displays serves a purpose. The behavior may not be one you like, but it's important to remember the behavior makes sense to the cat based on whatever he's dealing with. If you want to change the behavior you first have to figure out what the *pay-off* is for the cat. If you just resort to punishment or believe your cat is willfully misbehaving, you'll never solve the problem and you'll break the bond you share. Here are my guidelines for dealing with a behavior problem.



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Visit the Veterinarian

You may be certain a problem is strictly behavioral but there's a good chance a change in your cat's normal behavior could have a medical cause. Have your cat examined by the veterinarian. This needs to be the very first step to rule out any underlying medical reason for the unwanted behavior. Here are just a few examples of how a medical issue can present as a behavior change:

- A cat who is in pain may start displaying aggressive behavior when touched
- A urinary tract infection, diabetes, kidney disease, or other medical issue may be the reason a cat is eliminating away from the litter box
- Hearing loss or vision issues may be the reason a cat suddenly startles easily and displays fear
- Personality changes may be due to hyperthyroidism
- Age-related cognitive issues may be the reason an older cat no longer uses the litter box or has started vocalizing excessively
- Residual pain from being declawed may be the reason for litter box avoidance

After your cat has been examined by the veterinarian, you can begin to tackle this from a behavioral perspective. Look at the situation from your cat's point of view. I wrote the book, ***Think Like a Cat***, because I had seen so many people view behavior problems from the wrong perspective. Cat parents were labeling unwanted behaviors as deliberate misbehaviors. As a result, their attempts at solutions were ineffective and only added stress to their cats. Once your cat gets a clean bill of health, look at the problem from his point of view and not yours. My techniques are based on viewing the environment based on what a cat needs and whether the current situation allows the cat to engage in natural behavior or whether it promotes stress. Look at all behavior with a *think like a cat* view for effective and humane problem-solving. Here are some examples that show the *why* behind a behavior:

- If a cat is routinely ambushed by another cat when he tries to use the litter box, he may start avoiding the box and seek a safer location (such as in your closet or behind furniture)
- In a multicat home with an inadequate number of litter boxes, one or more of the cats may find alternative toileting locations (such as the bed, the closet, or your carpet)
- An abrupt or improper introduction of a new cat into the home may cause the resident cat to begin spraying
- Furniture scratching may be displayed if the environment doesn't have a tall, sturdy, appealing scratching post for the cat
- Upon returning from the veterinarian, a cat may be attacked by a companion cat who stayed home due to the smells of the clinic
- Separation anxiety may be the reason a cat has started displaying destructive behavior
- A chaotic household could be the reason a cat has started displaying fear or aggression
- A litter box that isn't scooped and cleaned often enough might be the reason a cat avoids using it
- Sudden fighting between two long-time cat companions may be redirected aggression due to the appearance of an unfamiliar cat outdoors



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Don't Wait for a Behavior Problem to Get Worse

If you notice something that doesn't seem right or you suspect the beginning of a problem, act on it before it gets more serious. If you have two cats who are showing signs of no longer getting along, or you notice anything else that isn't typical, work on it now. The sooner a problem is addressed correctly, the better the chance of success. By addressing it early, you will also greatly reduce the amount of stress your cat goes through. Stress is a big enemy in a cat's life and if left unchecked can lead to physical issues.

Never Punish

Punishment of any kind will cause your cat's stress to skyrocket. It will also create fear of you and that's the last thing you want. You never want a cat to associate you with the fear of physical pain and punishment. Even putting a cat in time-out for an unwanted behavior is counter-productive and confusing for him. Punishment damages the bond and could lead to a more serious problem such as defensive aggression or fear aggression. Punishment also means



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you truly don't understand animal behavior. When you punish, you're assuming a behavior is a willful act of disobedience and as you've already learned so far in this article, that's never the case. Behaviors are performed because the cat is trying to find a solution to a problem. If a behavior works for a cat, it gets repeated. Punishing a cat for eliminating outside of the litter box is just cruel. Punishing a cat for scratching the furniture because the scratching post is short and wobbly, will only create the added behavior problem of fear. So, if you've ever thought your cat needed to be punished for an unwanted behavior, let's end that belief here and now.

Find the Reason for the Behavior

To solve the behavior issue you must determine the root cause. If your cat is avoiding the litter box, the problem may have less to do with the box itself and more to do with the fear of being stalked and attacked by a companion cat every time he heads in that direction to eliminate. Having that tidbit of information is crucial to starting a behavior plan that involves adding more litter boxes in safe locations and working on the relationship between the cats. Once you know the reason for a behavior you can then 1) create a customized treatment plan, 2) make necessary environmental adjustments, and finally, 3) get life back to normal.



PHOTO BY PAUL HANAOKA ON UNSPLASH

The Road to Successful Behavior Training

Create a behavior plan that clearly defines what you want the cat to do instead of the unwanted behavior and how you can get him to do it. This doesn't mean placing just any scratching post in the room to magically get your cat to stop destroying the sofa. It involves a little more thought on your part. With the scratching example, it would mean you'd have to get a scratching post that is appealing to the cat (tall, sturdy, covered in an appealing material, placed in an ideal location) in order for the sofa to look less scratch-friendly. If it's a litter box problem and you determine the cat is avoiding the box because it's not being kept clean, punishment won't solve the problem but being more mindful of keeping the box regularly

scooped and cleaned will do the trick. Set the cat up for success by offering better options so the wanted behavior will naturally happen.

Work on Rebuilding the Bond

If your cat has been punished or if the behavior problem has caused stressed, work on rebuilding the bond between the two of you. Even if the behavior situation has you frustrated and you don't feel warm and friendly toward him right now, this is the exact time you should rebuild trust. Conduct interactive play sessions to ease stress (it'll help both of you), spend time together and rediscover the good relationship. Your cat needs you to provide security and comfort.



PHOTO BY PATRICK ROBERT DOYLE ON UNSPLASH

It's certainly upsetting to find your favorite jacket has been urinated on or your new sofa has been scratched, but if you lose your temper, your cat's stress level will increase and that doesn't help anyone. Just keep telling yourself that this isn't a willful act of disobedience. A behavior issue is the cat displaying a normal response to a situation. Getting upset won't do anything but add more damage to an already stressful situation.

Acknowledge Good Behavior

Let your cat know when he has done something right. This is something many people forget to do. No matter how small of a positive step in the right direction, it's still forward motion so acknowledge it. This is where clicker training is very helpful. If you're unfamiliar with clicker training, visit our website at catbehaviorassociates.com to learn how to incorporate it into your behavior plan. Clicker training is fun and very easy to learn. You can also acknowledge with praise, petting, playtime, or a tasty little treat.

Be Patient

Correcting problem behavior isn't a quick fix but the reward is worth the time. Tragically, many cats end up in shelters because families don't realize behavior problems can be corrected. Cats are relinquished to shelters, abandoned, tossed outdoors, or put to death for behavior issues that could've been corrected. Don't give up on your cat!

Get Help from A Professional if You Feel Overwhelmed

Some behavior problems may be beyond your ability to correct without professional guidance. If the problem is extremely serious, dangerous or you don't feel you can work on it yourself, contact your veterinarian for a referral to a certified cat behavior expert. There are many people on the internet claiming to be experts and whisperers but they lack true credentials, ethics, and experience. Make sure the behavior expert has professional credentials because an

unqualified person can actually make the situation worse. Ask your veterinarian for a referral to a veterinary behaviorist, certified applied animal behaviorist or an IAABC-certified cat behavior consultant.

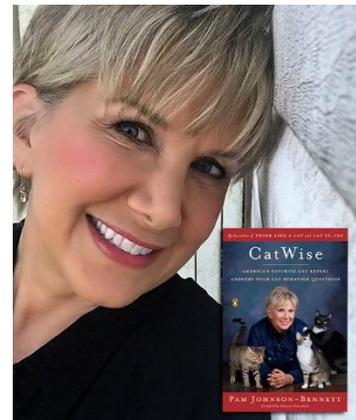
There are many resources available and the number of certified behavior professionals throughout the world increases every year. If there isn't a certified behavior professional in your area, many will work with you and your veterinarian by phone or through virtual consultation.

Have Questions?

For more specific information on cat behavior and training, refer to my books, *Think Like a Cat* and *CatWise*. You can also check out the book *Cat vs. Cat*, which deals exclusively with multicat issues. The books are available at bookstores everywhere, through your favorite online book retail site and on the website, catbehaviorassociates.com. If you have a question regarding your cat's health, please contact your veterinarian. This article is not intended as a replacement for your cat's veterinary care and is not dispensing medical advice.

About Pam Johnson-Bennett, CCBC

Pam is a Certified Cat Behavior Consultant and best-selling author of 8 books on cat behavior. She starred in the Animal Planet series *Psycho Kitty*, seen in Canada and the UK. She was vice president of the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants and founded their Cat Division, where she served 8 years as Chair. She has served on advisory boards for the American Humane Association as well as other animal welfare organizations. She lectures internationally on cat behavior and makes frequent television and radio appearances. Previously, she was the cat behavior columnist for *Cats* magazine, *Modern Cat* magazine, *The Daily Cat*, and *Cat Fancy* online. She was also the resident cat behavior expert for Yahoo and iVillage online. She is considered a pioneer in the field of cat behavior consulting, having started her career in 1982. Some of her books are used as textbooks in behavior courses and she has influenced many practicing in the field today. Her ground-breaking book, *Think Like a Cat*, is considered the cat bible by veterinarians, shelters, and cat owners worldwide.



Pam owns Cat Behavior Associates, LLC, a veterinarian-referred cat behavior consultation business in Nashville, TN.