

EDUCATING CAT OWNERS

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By talking with owners, technicians can help resolve behavior problems before they escalate.



According to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association (APPMA) 2005/2006 National Pet Owners Survey, a record 90.5 million cats are owned in the United States.¹ Although cat ownership has increased, an estimated 97,000 cats are euthanized annually in clinics because of behavior problems.² Most cats that enter shelters are between 6 months and 3 years of age and have lost their homes because they displayed behaviors (e.g., not using the litterbox, destroying furniture) that their owners perceived as unacceptable.³ By educating cat owners on how to effectively handle these behaviors, technicians can help prevent pets from losing their homes.

The APPMA conducted its first survey of American pet owners in 1978, but it wasn't until the 1992 survey that the number of cats (62 million) exceeded the number of dogs (53 million) in American households – a trend that has continued to the present.⁴ In fact, it wasn't until the 1960s and early 1970s that the demands of the growing population of cat owners in the United States encouraged veterinary schools to add more information on cats to their curricula, publishers to include information about cats in their veterinary texts, and pharmaceutical companies to manufacture more feline products.⁵

VETERINARY INTERVENTION

As the lifespan of pet cats has increased, so has our knowledge of their medical needs. In addition, feline

training and behavior modification techniques have changed. All of these factors make it imperative that technicians educate *all* cat owners about normal cat behavior as well as how to prevent and manage undesirable behaviors. As is true of many medical conditions, behavior problems only get worse with time and later require more effort and money to correct. Before treating a problem as a behavior issue, the veterinary staff must rule out a medical condition. Therefore, technicians must obtain a thorough patient history and ask clients specific questions about their cat's behavior (see box on page 705). If a medical condition is ruled out and the problem is considered to be behavior related, then the client needs to be advised on how to handle the problem.

Surveys indicate that 90% of owners want help with managing their pets' behavior,⁶ and the veterinary staff continues to be the leading source of information about pets. Therefore, cat owners need to be advised on how to resolve undesirable situations. Veterinary staff, especially technicians, often educate dog owners about preventing and managing dog behaviors (e.g., jumping, chewing, biting, indoor elimination) before these issues become problematic for the client. But how often do the veterinary staff talk to cat owners about preventing and managing behaviors such as litterbox avoidance, destructive scratching, and climbing on furniture and counters? How often do the staff provide advice about common owner-related issues (e.g., pet restrictions in rental housing, client allergies, pregnancy) that may cause a client to give up a pet? When it comes to helping clients establish and maintain a harmonious relationship with their cats, technicians can never offer advice too early.

BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION Socializing Kittens

Early socialization – especially before 9 weeks of age – will have positive long-term effects on a kitten's willingness to approach and be held by people.⁷ Kittens should be handled by more than one person during this period so that they become accus-

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Reasons for Scratching

- **Condition claws** by removing old nail sheaths
- **Display dominance** in front of subordinate cats
- **Scent mark** with the glands on the paws
- **Visually mark territory** by leaving shredded matter as evidence
- **Stretch and exercise** forelegs

tomed to being handled. In addition, kittens should be encouraged to socialize and engage in play activities. Play activities can help increase their physical coordination, social skills, and learning limits.⁸ A kitten that is well adapted will form a stronger bond with its owners.

Teaching Litterbox Basics

Litterbox avoidance is one of the top 10 reasons that cats are relinquished to shelters in the United States.⁹ Therefore, technicians should discuss how to prevent litterbox problems with cat owners starting at the pet's initial visit to the clinic.

Top Ten Reasons Cats Are Relinquished to Shelters^a

1. Too many cats in the house
2. Allergies
3. Moving
4. Cost of pet maintenance
5. Landlord issues
6. No homes for littermates
7. Housesoiling
8. Personal problems
9. Inadequate facilities
10. Cat does not get along with other pets in the household

^aNational Council on Pet Population Study & Policy: *The Top Ten Reasons for Pet Relinquishment to Shelters in the United States*. Accessed October 2006 at www.petpopulation.org/topten.html.

Numerous kinds of litter and litterboxes are available. Most cats tend to prefer unscented, finer-grained litter. Litter that clumps cuts down on odor, helps keep the litterbox clean, and allows cat owners to count urine balls each time they clean the box and to inspect the feces for consistency, blood, mucus, and parasites. Cats that dig for 4 seconds or less prior to elimination may be candidates for elimination problems.¹⁰ Therefore, clients should offer a variety of litters simultaneously in order to find a product that will encourage their cat to dig for longer than 4 seconds.

Cats tend to like clean, appropriately sized litterboxes that are located in accessible yet quiet areas of the house so that they cannot be ambushed by other cats. An appropriate size for a litterbox is at least 1.5 times the length of the cat's body.¹⁰ Kittens and arthritic cats may need low-sided boxes or ones with a low-cut entrance; in addition, these boxes should be placed on different levels of the home. Whether to use covered or uncovered litterboxes depends on the cat's preference.¹⁰ However, litterboxes that are hooded or placed in out-of-the-way, hidden places can prevent owners from observing any straining or frequent trips to the litterbox that may indicate a medical problem.

In multicat households, there should be as many boxes as cats, plus one, placed in at least two different locations.¹⁰ Boxes should not be placed side by side. Maintaining a very clean litterbox is important to many cats. Using a clumping litter and scooping out the litterbox daily may significantly reduce accidents outside the litterbox. Automatic self-cleaning litterboxes are another option.

Stressful disruptions in a cat's routine may lead to elimination outside the box. Such disruptions could be related to various factors (e.g., new or moved litterbox, new home, another cat, new furniture, unfamiliar people). Several products are available (e.g., electric scent diffusers) to help a cat adjust to these stressful situations. In

addition, providing companionship to cats in the form of petting, grooming, and playing can reduce stress. Providing visual and mental stimulation (e.g., a bird feeder outside a window, a paper bag to explore), rotating toys, and hiding food can also be helpful.

Clients should be told that cats do not stop using the litterbox out of spite or revenge. All cats that stop using or make frequent trips to the litterbox should be seen by the veterinarian to rule out a medical condition because these cats are at increased risk for urethral obstruction, irreversible organ damage, or lower urinary tract disease, which may become life threatening. Urethral obstruction is more likely to occur in male cats and can be fatal; therefore, male cats should receive immediate care.

Preventing Destructive Scratching

Scratching is a normal and necessary part of feline behavior. At 8 weeks of age, kittens are just beginning to scratch items; therefore, clients should be instructed early about how to trim their cats' nails.

Only 41% of owners have a scratching post for their cats.¹ Cats that have access to scratching posts and other acceptable scratching objects are less likely to scratch other items. Scratching stations should be made of materials that cats prefer, such as sisal rope, rough fabric, corrugated cardboard, and wood. Scratching materials may also be placed flat on the floor. Both vertical and horizontal scratching surfaces should be sturdy and long enough for cats to stretch the length of their body.

Clients can teach their cat to use scratching posts or other acceptable objects by rubbing catnip on the surface – not by rubbing the cat's paws on the post, which may frighten it – and by playing with wand toys around the post. Clients should be instructed to position posts and other scratching objects in their cat's favorite areas, especially in areas that are accessible when the cat first wakes up and stretches.

Objects that the client wishes to protect should be made unattractive to cats. Numerous products are on the market to help deter cats from scratching unacceptable objects or to encourage cats to scratch in certain areas. For example, a catnip-sprinkled cardboard scratch pad can be placed on top of carpet areas that the cat has found attractive.

It is important for clients to understand that punishing cats that scratch without providing acceptable objects increases the behavior as well as the cat's frustration and only teaches the cat to run from its owner.¹¹ Providing acceptable alternatives and rewarding appropriate behavior are more effective than merely punishing inappropriate behavior. Punishing cats incorrectly (e.g., yelling, hitting) may stress them and make them fearful of a particular family member. If punishment is not delivered consistently by all members of the family, cats will learn when they can or cannot get away with inappropriate scratching. Remote punishment not associated with a person (e.g., a surreptitious squirt of water from a spray bottle) may be helpful if coupled with attempts to redirect and reward the cat for using an appropriate scratching surface. Clients who only pay attention to their cats when they do something inappropriate may inadvertently be encouraging such behavior.

Providing Adequate and Safe Play

Play increases when kittens are 4 to 13 weeks of age and then declines.¹⁰ Kittens are more likely to fall or cause damage by knocking items over. It is normal for kittens to explore higher places because their ability to jump is developing. To discourage cats from jumping on counters and tables, clients can apply cat deterrent products. However, they must also provide appropriate outlets for jumping. Owners can strategically position cat trees (rubbed with catnip) near windows and play with their cats near and on the trees to encourage their use. Exploring cardboard boxes and empty

paper bags (with handles removed) and hunting for food in different areas of the house can also provide good outlets for a kitten's abundant energy.

Cat owners may unintentionally reward their kitten for annoying nighttime behavior by showing the kitten attention – even negative attention (e.g., yelling, pushing it away) – or getting up and feeding the kitten. Ignoring such behavior in kittens is difficult but important. Owners can help prevent some of this behavior by playing with the kitten when they are awake, especially during the evening.

Two daily 15-minute play periods should satisfy most adult cats. If a cat loses interest quickly, the owner may need to experiment with different types of toys to encourage the cat to participate. Numerous toys are available (e.g., balls, crinkly stuffed toys, track toys) that allow a cat to safely entertain itself. In addition, DVDs that feature birds, rodents, and fish can also provide entertainment. Toys that dispense kibble when rolled are another option. By rotating toys every week or so, clients can keep their pet interested. When playing with their cats, owners can throw a portion of the pet's daily dry food allowance so that the cat can chase, pounce on, and eat its "prey."

Playing rough with cats should be strongly discouraged. In addition, children should be taught how to properly handle and play with the cat. To prevent injuries from occurring to the child or the cat, all interactions should be supervised.

Managing Cat Introductions

Introducing a new cat into the household is more likely to be successful if the personalities and activity levels of the cats are compatible and if the cats are not forced to interact with one another. The new cat should be confined to one room with all its necessities in order to give the cat time to adjust and feel safe. It is not unusual for cats to hide when they first enter a new environment.

Questions That Should Be Asked When Obtaining a History

- How often does your cat urinate or defecate outside of the litterbox?
- How often does your pet spray in the house?
- How often does your cat show aggression (e.g., hissing, biting, scratching) toward people? Toward family members, strangers, or both?
- How often does your pet show fearful behaviors (e.g., running away, hiding)?
- How often does your cat show destructive behaviors (e.g., scratching or chewing objects)?
- How often does your pet have problematic interactions with other cats or pets in the household?
- If the behavior changes are recent, what other changes have you noticed?

Cats should not be dragged from under beds or other hiding places. Cat owners should sit patiently and allow the cat to approach them. Recommend that the new cat be allowed gradual access to the rest of the house so it is not overwhelmed. Pheromone therapy for the newcomer as well as the resident cat may be helpful during this initial phase.¹⁰ Pheromones are substances produced by an animal to elicit a specific behavioral reaction in other animals of the same species. Synthetic pheromone products are available. These substances have been shown to have a calming effect.¹¹

Feeding each cat on opposite sides of a closed door to create positive associations with one another, rubbing each cat with the other's facial scent (with a brush or a washcloth), and letting the newcomer explore other areas of the house while the resident cat explores the new cat's room are good strategies for making introductions. Accustoming the new-

Resources

BEHAVIOR

- www.petsforlife.org provides behavior tip sheets in English, Spanish, and French.
- www.petsincredible.com offers the cat care DVD “Completely Cats”; available to veterinarians for \$1 per copy.

NEW OR EXPECTANT MOTHERS

- www.cdc.gov/NCIDOD/dpd/parasites/toxoplasmosis/ToxoWomen.pdf provides a brochure on toxoplasmosis that can be distributed to clients.
- www.hsus.org offers tip sheets titled “Pregnancy and Toxoplasmosis” and “Introducing Your Pet and New Baby.”

PET ALLERGIES

- Kalstone S: *Allergic to Pets? The Breakthrough Guide to Living with the Animals You Love*. New York, Bantam Dell Books, 2006.
- www.hsus.org offers a tip sheet on ways to reduce allergy symptoms titled “Allergies to Pets.”

PET-FRIENDLY HOUSING

- www.rentwithpets.org offers information on conducting a successful housing search and moving safely with pets, as well as links to pet-friendly housing all across the country.

comer to a harness and leash may work well for eventual face-to-face introductions, which must be supervised for several weeks. However, regardless of the strategy, clients should be given realistic expectations that it could take up to 8 months for the cats to become accustomed to one another.

Water can be squirted on the cats should hissing and posturing escalate to a physical confrontation. The owner should be instructed that fights are an indication that the introduction process needs to go more slowly. In multicat households, it is useful to give cats vertical as well as horizontal space to work out their relationship. Access to windowsills, wall units, stepladders, and cat trees may help.

STERILIZATION

Sterilization rates of pet cats are high (82% to 91%) in some parts of the country.¹² However, many cats have litters before sterilization for numerous reasons, including:

- The owners could not afford to sterilize the pet.
- The owners thought the cat was too young to become pregnant.
- The owners did not have the time to sterilize the cat.
- The cat was an indoor pet that had escaped.
- The owners thought the cat could not become pregnant because she was still nursing a previous litter.

Clients should be encouraged to schedule a spay or neuter while they are at the clinic for their pet’s final vaccination series.

An unsterilized cat is more likely to urine mark in the house, get into fights, and roam (if allowed) outside.¹⁰ Spaying eliminates the possibility of uterine or ovarian cancer and greatly reduces the incidence of mammary tumors, particularly when a pet is spayed before her first estrous cycle. Neutering eliminates testicular cancer and decreases the incidence of prostate disease. Also, sterilizing cats before they have even one litter

greatly reduces the number of homeless cats.

TRANSITIONING FROM OUTDOORS TO INDOORS

Although only two out of three veterinarians recommend keeping cats indoors,¹² cats that are allowed to roam outside are more susceptible to painful and often life-shortening tragedies. Kittens that are kept indoors from the start rarely show a desire to go outside and, in fact, are frightened if they accidentally get out.

Transforming a free-roaming stray or owned cat into an indoor cat can be achieved with planning, persistence, and patience. Some cats, even those that go outside only occasionally, will scratch at doors, claw at windows, yowl, and try to dash through open doors. If a client is having trouble slowly transitioning a stray cat despite feeding it indoors, providing exciting indoor play activities, and having it spend more and more time in the home, it may be better to make the transition at once.

During the transition period, pheromone products as well as short-term drug or homeopathic therapy may be helpful.

PROVIDING PROPER IDENTIFICATION

All pets, including indoor cats, should have some form of identification. Indoor cats can easily slip out of an open door and become lost. Properly fitted breakaway collars are the best form of visible identification. Several collars should be kept in the examination room so that technicians can show clients how to properly fit the collar – it should not be too tight or too loose. If the collar is too loose, it may get caught on objects in the environment. Two fingers should fit comfortably under the collar, and the collar should not move above the neck or head. Clients should be instructed to check the collar’s fit from time to time, especially on growing kittens. An engraved identification tag can be attached to the collar. Embroidered

collars that contain contact information on the cloth itself are also available. Nameplate tags that attach permanently with rivets to the collar, and tags that have slits at both ends and slide onto the collar are other options. Practices can encourage proper identification by selling collars and at least one form of visible identification.

Fortunately, more and more shelters now microchip adopted animals. If a client has a pet that has been microchipped, the client should be reminded to keep his or her information with the registry current. Technicians should discuss the benefits of microchipping with all of their clients. Microchips can be painlessly injected under the skin in seconds. A poster promoting the benefits of microchips can help encourage clients to invest in this valuable protection. A microchip injector can be kept in each examination room so that technicians can readily show it to their clients. Informational brochures can be displayed in the waiting and examination rooms; they can also be included in every kitten and cat care kit. At the very least, owners should have a good, recent photograph of their pet to send to shelters and put on posters should the animal become lost.

**REASONS FOR RELINQUISHING PETS
Rental Housing**

Among the top owner-related reasons for relinquishing cats to animal shelters are moving and landlord issues.⁹ Whether clients are moving across town or across the country, technicians can be a great resource in helping them to find rental housing that accepts pets. A letter of reference from the practice may help clients who are looking for pet-friendly housing get their foot in the door. Technicians should contact their local animal shelter to see if the facility has a directory of rental properties in the community that welcome pets and then refer clients to the shelter.

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Allergies

Allergies are another reason owners give when relinquishing their cats to animal shelters. With the exception of individuals who are severely sensitive to cats, many owners should be able to sensibly manage their pet allergy symptoms without giving up their pet. Clients with pet allergies should create a pet-free zone (preferably in the bedroom), wash their hands after touching the animal, and replace heavy curtains and drapes with fabrics that can be easily washed. Numerous products, such as HEPA air cleaners, vacuums with HEPA filters, and solutions that can be applied directly to the pet to limit dander, are on the market to help pet owners manage their allergies.

In addition, recent studies have indicated that children who have not yet developed allergies may be less likely to develop allergies to pets if their mothers are not asthmatic and they are raised with multiple pets.¹³ If a client is considering giving up a pet because of allergies, the technician can encourage the owner to consult an allergist first to determine what is causing the allergy. Allergies tend to be cumulative, and many allergy sufferers are sensitive to more than one allergen (e.g., mites, dust, pollen) and should reduce the overall allergen level in their homes.¹⁴ Medical control of symptoms and hyposensitization to allergens are options worth discussing with an allergist.

Toxoplasmosis

Pregnant clients who have cats may be concerned about the risk of toxoplasmosis.¹⁵ Toxoplasmosis is caused by exposure to the single-cell parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*.¹⁶ *Toxoplasma* infection may occur when an individual comes into contact with improperly cooked meat or with infected cat feces (e.g., gardening without gloves in soil contaminated by an infected cat). When a woman is infected with toxoplasmosis for the first time during pregnancy, the baby can be born with birth defects.¹⁵ In the United States, it is uncommon for owners to contract the disease from

pets; however, pregnant owners should still take the following precautions¹⁵:

- Refrain from eating raw or undercooked meat or feeding it to the cat
- Have someone else clean the litterbox daily
- Keep the cat indoors so that it cannot eat rodents or birds that may be infected
- Do not bring a new cat into the house while pregnant

Technicians should reassure pregnant clients that it is difficult for pet cats to directly transmit the disease to their owners. Brochures should be made available to clients to help alleviate any concerns.

CONCLUSION

Most pets surrendered to shelters are evaluated by a veterinarian in the year before relinquishment.⁷ Therefore, it is vital that technicians step in before a behavior problem escalates. Unresolved behavior problems cause veterinary practices to lose approximately 15% of their client base annually.⁷ Unfortunately, owners who give up their pets often do so without knowing that many problems can be resolved. Counseling clients on behavior and other issues can increase a technician's job satisfaction.^{17,18} Technicians have the power to educate cat owners, thereby strengthening the relationship between clients and pets, extending and improving the quality of animals' lives, and promoting client loyalty.

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