



## First aid advice for feline behaviour problems

Trudi Atkinson RVN, Dip.AS (CABC), CCAB

The following advice is not to replace referral to a clinical animal behaviourist. Many behaviour problems require in-depth investigation plus counselling of the owner/caregiver to achieve effective human behaviour change. To do this requires both time and a high level of knowledge and experience.

The aims of first aid behavioural advice are:

- To offer short term relief.
- To stop or prevent worsening of the problem.
- To help promote improvement and set the owner/caregiver on the right path towards resolution or sufficient modification of the problem.

### For all behaviour problems:

#### **Discourage the owner/caregiver from attempting to punish the cat and explain why:**

Attempts at punishment are often ineffective and can be counterproductive. Any attempts at punishment 'after the act' will be ineffective because a cat does not have the cognitive ability to make the association between the owner's attempted 'correction' and the unwanted behaviour. Many 'problem' behaviours are normal and necessary behaviours but performed in an inappropriate location or considered undesirable by the owner/caregiver. Therefore, even if 'caught in the act' a cat is less likely to associate the 'punishment' with the behaviour and more likely to associate the unpleasant event with the owner/caregiver. This can be highly damaging the cat/owner relationship, and the only thing that the cat is likely to learn is to avoid people when performing the behaviour. Also, a number of feline behaviour problems are related to stress. Attempts at punishment and/or anger demonstrated by the owner/caregiver can significantly increase stress increasing the cat's need to engage in the problem behaviour.

### Cat Conflict

#### **Fighting or Playing?**

**Do the cats make any sound?** Other than an occasional chirrup or minimal defensive sounds if play gets too rough, play is normally silent. Whereas fighting will usually involve vocalisations such as growling, hissing and high-pitched defensive cries.

**Do the cats 'swap roles'?** Alternating roles is seen during play. If one cat is predominately attacking or chasing the other this is more likely to be aggression, or unwanted play directed towards a cat that feels intimidated by the attentions of the other.

**At other times do the cats want to stay close together or apart?** Cats that are in an amicable relationship with each other will usually want to spend time with each other. Cats that fight will usually try to avoid each other at all other times.

#### **First aid behavioural advice for fighting cats**

##### **If fighting is frequent and/or severe:**

- Keep the cats separated until a full behavioural consultation can be conducted.

##### **If fighting is infrequent and/or mild:**

- Ensure that the cats have easy and always available escape routes away from each other.
- Ensure that the victim has easily accessed safe places:
  - Places to hide e.g., under furniture, cardboard boxes etc. (making sure that there is more than one entrance / exit so that the aggressor cannot trap the victim)



- Plenty of elevated areas: tops of furniture, cat trees, wall mounted shelves and cat beds etc.
- Access to a room that the aggressor cannot get into.
- Watch for signs of impending fighting or chasing:
  - a. Staring, either one at the other or both at each other
  - b. Stalking
  - c. Growling
  - d. Dilated pupils
  - e. Swishing tail
- If fighting or chasing appears imminent, place a physical barrier, for example a large cushion or flattened cardboard box, between the cats to block their view of each other, Try to redirect the aggressor away with a toy or with dry food scattered onto the ground a good distance away from the other cat. This should allow time for the victim to move away.
- Avoid any trigger factors that owners are aware of.
- Reduce competition between the cats by increasing resources or ensuring that access to important resources are ample and in areas where one cat cannot block the other's access.
  - Feed the cats in separate areas, preferably separate rooms.
  - Provide extra feeding dishes and/or puzzle feeders, plus water dishes located away from the food dishes.
  - Provide a sufficient number of litter trays in separate areas.
  - Ensure a good choice of safe, warm, and comfortable resting places in various locations around the house.

## The use of pheromonatherapy in cases of cat conflict

A Feliway™ (Ceva) Friends or Optimum diffuser positioned where all the cats are most likely to rest at the same time, may help to reduce conflict along with relevant and correct behavioural advice.

## House-Soiling – elimination

**As a short-term measure only, confine the cat to an area where the soiling is easier to manage.**

For example, somewhere that is easy to clean, or where carpets and furniture can be covered with an impermeable and easily cleaned covering.

**Effective Cleaning.** It is important to rid the area of the scent of urine and/or faeces. Cats will often continue to eliminate in locations where they have previously urinated or defecated. Also, the residual scent of urine deposited via 'Spraying' can also encourage a cat to 'over mark' in the same location.

1. Remove faeces / mop up urine.
2. Using a 10%-20% solution of a biological detergent or a proprietary enzymatic 'odour elimination' product, wash the area including a margin of at least 2-3 inches outside of where the urine or faeces was deposited. If the solution or product has not been used before always test a small area first.
3. Rinse if using detergent. Pat dry with a clean towel or kitchen paper.
4. Wipe or spray over lightly with surgical spirit (test a small area first).
5. Leave to dry for at least 30 minutes.
6. Do not use bleach or ammonia-based products which may increase the attraction for the cat to reuse the area for elimination. Also do not use phenolic disinfectants (the type that go cloudy in water), as these are toxic to cats.

**Consider the elimination areas (litter trays) available to the cat(s) and make changes as necessary:**

# Fellowship of Animal Behaviour Clinicians



**Provide at least one indoor litter tray:** A cat might normally eliminate outside, but there are numerous reasons why a cat might be deterred from doing so. Investigation will be needed to find out why this is. But in the short term the cat must be provided with an indoor toilet.

**Provide a sufficient number of litter trays:** To meet the requirements for most cats the general guideline is 'one per cat plus one extra' (Carney et al, 2014). These should be located apart from each other. Litter trays that are located next to each other will be regarded by the cats as a single elimination area.

**Where are the litter trays located?** Litter trays must be placed in areas that are easy to find and easy for the cat to access.

Do not place litter trays close to:

- Food & Water
- Resting areas
- Entrances & Exits
- Anywhere that the cat is likely to be disturbed e.g.
  - In corridors or 'high traffic' areas.
  - Near to doors, cupboards etc.
  - Areas that are regularly used by other animals or children.

**Are the litter trays large enough?** The general guideline regarding litter tray size is; 1 ½ times the length of the cat, excluding its tail (Carney et al, 2014). Litter trays that are too small can be uncomfortable for a cat to use, which can deter the cat from using it (Guy et al 2014).

**Are covered or uncovered litter trays provided?** Because this can be an individual preference the owner/caregiver may need to experiment to discover what the cat prefers. However, it is also important to point out the potential problems with the use of covered trays:

- It is less easy to see when they need cleaning.
- Smells can become trapped which might deter the cat from using it.
- In a multi-cat household a cat can be more at risk of being ambushed or trapped inside a covered tray by another cat.

**What litter substrate is being used?** Most cats prefer a granular, unscented 'clumping' litter (Villeneuve-Beugnet et al 2018). But if the litter substrate has been recently changed and this change corresponds with the house-soiling behaviour then go back to what was previously being used.

**How clean is the litter substrate?** Cats generally prefer to use clean litter substrate (Neilson, 2004; Ellis et al 2017). Faeces and urine clumps should be removed as often and as soon as possible.

**How deep is the cat litter?** Cats require a sufficient depth of litter to allow them to dig into it and cover their waste. Also, an insufficient amount will become soiled very quickly. An approximate depth of 4cm (1.5 inches) is suitable for most cats, but the ideal depth can depend on the size of the cat, and the number of cats using the same litter tray.

**A number of things can deter a cat from using a litter tray and should be avoided:**

**Air fresheners located close to the litter tray.** These can be over-powering and unpleasant to cats.

**Plastic litter tray liners.** The cat's claws can get caught on plastic liners which can be uncomfortable for most cats, painful for cats with joint disease.

**Self-Cleaning litter trays or trays with an internal grid filter.** If the mechanism activates when the cat is nearby this could seriously frighten the cat and deter it from using the litter tray.

An internal grid filter can present the same problem as a plastic liner in that the cat may catch its claws in the holes of the grid.

## Using pheromatherapy for house-soiling

Installing a plug-in diffuser (Feliway™ Classic or Optimum) close to a litter tray can sometimes help to encourage a cat to use that litter tray use by increasing the cat's sense of security in that location.

## Urine Marking

**Is the cat neutered?** Urine marking is hormonally influenced in entire cats, both male and female. Neutering can prevent or reduce the incidence of urine marking by 90%-95% (Hart & Cooper 1984).

# Fellowship of Animal Behaviour Clinicians



**Clean sites where the cat has sprayed as described above under 'effective cleaning'.**

**Aim to limit/reduce stress.** A full behaviour consultation may be necessary to correctly and fully identify and address sources of stress. But it can help to address common stressors as a first-aid approach.

**Consider and investigate any possible underlying pain or discomfort.**

**Avoid or try to repair as best as possible, any major disruptions to the cat's normal routine.**

**Prevent neighbouring cats from entering the house.** If the resident cat uses a cat flap install an exclusive, preferably a microchip activated, cat flap.

**Increase space, especially elevated space and hiding places for the cat.** Make sure that the cat has safe and quiet places to retreat to away from likely stressors, such as visitors, children, loud noises and other pets.

**Increase resources, especially in a multi-cat household.**

- Food and water locations
- Litter trays
- Warm, safe resting areas

**Increase enrichment.**

- Provide cardboard boxes around the house for the cat to play and/or hide in.
- Engage the cat in interactive play at least once daily. Preferably using wand toys that keep teeth and claws away from human hands.
- Provide the cat with puzzle feeders.

**Respect the cat's need for control and predictability.**

- Allow the cat to sleep and eat undisturbed.
- Do not interact with the cat, and especially do not restrain it in any way if does any of the following:
  - Moving away or attempting to move away.
  - Swiping at you or pushing you away with a paw
  - Hissing or Growling

**Using pheromonotherapy for urine marking**

A Feliway™ Classic or Feliway Optimum diffuser can sometimes help to reduce marking alongside behaviour therapy. But is less likely to be effective without also identifying and correctly addressing potential stressors.

## Human-Directed Aggression

Because of potential risks, full assessment and behaviour consultation for such cases should only be conducted by a fully qualified and experienced clinical behaviourist. However, providing immediate and correct behavioural first aid advice can be of great importance to help prevent injury or further injury.

**Owners/caregivers must be made aware of the importance of seeking medical advice if they, or another person is badly bitten or scratched (Oehler, R.L. et al 2009).**

**Advise the owner/caregiver of potential warning signs that a cat might be about to become aggressive:**

- Dilated pupils
- Ears rotated back and/or flattened to the side
- 'Swishing' tail
- Growling or hissing
- Piloerection (hair standing on end)
- Lowered body posture

**If any of the above signs are seen the following advice should be followed:**

- **Do not** approach or attempt to handle the cat.
- **Do not** stare at the cat. Avoid direct eye contact.



- If you are already near the cat, try to move away slowly and steadily. Avoid fast or erratic movements.
- **Never** put your face close to the cat.
  - Do not make any sounds that might frighten the cat or cause it to react aggressively e.g., Shouting
  - Hissing
  - 'Shushing'
  - Clapping
- Be careful not to block the cat's escape route away from you, or anything else that it might be frightened of.
- If possible, leave the room and shut the door or place a physical barrier between yourself and the cat.
- If the cat bites or scratches, try to keep still. If teeth or claws have broken the skin, movement may cause tearing and increase injury. Movement might also trigger further defensive aggression or a predatory reaction. When the cat releases its grip, move away slowly.

## **Avoiding situations that might result in the cat becoming aggressive**

- **Never** attempt to punish, goad or threaten the cat.
- **Do not** encourage the cat to play with hands or feet.
- Avoid any trigger factors that owners are aware of.

## **Furniture Scratching**

**Clip the cat's nails.** Clipping the nails may help to reduce damage and may also reduce furniture scratching if the cat's primary reason for scratching is to 'condition' the claws.

### **Provide an alternative scratching location**

**Scratch posts and scratch pads– what to look for and what to avoid:**

#### **Material**

As well as being an effective way of 'conditioning' the claws, scratching plays an important role in visual and olfactory signalling by leaving visually evident scratches and scent marks. The surface of a scratch post or pad therefore needs to be made of a material, such as sisal rope, that allows the cat to leave visible marks and provide enough resistance to remove the dead outer claw sheaths. Older cats, however, and those suffering from degenerative joint disease may find it more comfortable to scratch on carpet or some other similar softer material.

#### **Height or length**

The height of scratch post, and the length of a scratch pad is also important because stretching is another important part of scratching. For a small to medium adult cat a scratch post should be a minimum height of 60cm. Large or long bodied cats may need a scratch post of at least 90cm. Toys or platforms on top of a scratch post can also hinder stretching so are best avoided.

#### **Stability**

A scratch post or pad must also be sturdy and stable enough so that it does not move when the cat leans into it to scratch.

### **Preparing a new scratch post or pad**

Preparation is important. A cat is more likely to use a scratch post or pad if it contains some evidence, preferably visual and olfactory, of it having been scratched previously.

- Apply visible scratches by using the tip of a screw or similar.
- Transfer the cat's scent to the new scratch post or pad. This can be done by gently rubbing the underneath of the cat's front feet with a clean, dry cloth and then rubbing the cloth over the new post or pad. However, not all cats will accept having their feet handled this way, so another effective means of transferring scent is to simply rub the new post or pad over the areas where the cat has been scratching most recently.



- Cat nip (*Nepeta cataria*) can also act as an attractant and encourage cats to use a new scratch pad or post. *Feliscratch by Feliway™* (Ceva) also contains cat nip plus a synthetic version of the feline interdigital semiochemical along with a dye that acts as visual marker.

## **Where to locate the scratch pad or post**

Position the post or pad in the same area, or as close as possible to where the cat is currently scratching. If this area is not convenient, once the cat is using the post or pad reliably it may then be very slowly moved to a more suitable location.

## **How many scratching posts or pad to provide?**

Posts and/or pads should be provided in each place where the cat regularly scratches.

## **Protecting the furniture and applying effective deterrents**

- It can be very difficult for a cat to scratch on something that is hanging loosely, therefore draping a loose throw or similar over the furniture can work as a simple and effective deterrent.
- Plastic film wrapped around a chair leg or wherever the cat is scratching can also deter scratching because it makes the surface difficult and unpleasant for the cat to scratch.
- Using double-sided sticky tape. This can also be effective, but care must be taken to prevent the cat from becoming entangled, frightened or hurt by the tape.
  - Wrap the tape all around a chair leg or similar so that it cannot come away and get stuck to the cat. If this is not possible use short lengths, no more than 10cm, so that if the tape does get stuck to the cat, it is not long enough to get tangled in the cat's fur or around the cat's legs.
  - Always test the tape first. If it has a strong adhesive, reduce the 'stickiness' of the exposed side, by repeatedly pressing your fingers against it so that it is less likely to stick to the cat and will come away easily if it does. The aim is that the cat should experience an unpleasant sensation but not pain or discomfort when it attempts to scratch the area.
  - Also always test a small area of the furniture first to ensure that it will not be damaged by having sticky tape applied to it.

## **References:**

Carney, H.C., Sadek, T.P., Curtis, T.M., Halls, V., Heath, S., Hutchison, P., Mundschenk, K. and Westropp, J.L., 2014. AAFP and ISFM guidelines for diagnosing and solving house-soiling behavior in cats. *Journal of feline medicine and surgery*, 16(7), pp.579-598.

Guy et al (2014) Litterbox size preference in domestic cats (*Felis catus*). *Journal of Veterinary Behavior: Clinical Applications and Research* 9 (2) p 78-82

Hart and Cooper (1984) Factors relating to urine spraying and fighting in prepubertally gonadectomized cats. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*

Oehler, R.L. et al (2009) Bite-related and septic syndromes caused by cats and dogs. *The Lancet infectious diseases* 9 (7) p. 439-447

Ellis, J.J., McGowan, R.T.S. and Martin, F., 2017. Does previous use affect litter box appeal in multi-cat households? *Behavioural processes*, 141, pp.284-290.

Neilson, J., 2004. Thinking outside the box: feline elimination. *Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery*, 6(1), pp.5-11.

Villeneuve-Beugnet et al (2018) Field assessment of cats' litter box substrate preferences. *Journal of Veterinary Behavior* 25 p 65-70