

Correcting Unwanted Behavior in Your Cat

Sometimes cats do things that we don't like such as jumping up on the table or counters, scratching on the furniture, or attacking our feet when we walk by. The first thing we need to learn before we try to "correct" these annoying behaviors is that they are all motivated by natural feline instincts. Cats naturally seek high places to rest and survey their environment, so you should provide your cat with several high perches around the house. Cats also naturally scratch on vertical surfaces to remove dead nail sheaths and mark their territory, so you should provide a proper scratching post and encourage your cat to use them. And cats love to play, and their play behavior often involves aspects of the hunt - and sometimes the only available prey is a pair of moving feet. Provide your cat with plenty of toys and spend some time everyday throwing a ball or playing with a feather dancer type toy.

Redirecting your cat to perform these natural behaviors where and when you feel is appropriate is the best way to deal with these problems. However, sometimes you may also need to let your cat know that the old place or action is not acceptable. The worse way to try to correct unwanted behavior is to punish your cat physically or verbally. All this does is make your cat afraid of you and teach her that it's only safe to do these things when you aren't around.

A better way to correct a cat is to have the environment do the punishing. Environmental punishment is very effective because an animals' behavior is dictated by the consequences that follow. If doing a certain thing leads to an unpleasant experience, then your cat will be less likely to do it again. Letting the environment do the punishing has the added benefit of removing you as the bad guy.

The idea is to connect something slightly unpleasant (but not harmful or frightening) with the behavior you are trying to get rid of. Aversive textures, smells, tastes, or sounds can be used to "booby trap" off-limit areas or interrupt unwanted behaviors. The following are some examples of each:

Textures: sticky paper, aluminum foil, or a plastic carpet runner (knobby side up) can be placed in areas you want to be off limits. Cats hate walking on these surfaces.

Smells: citronella, perfumes, citrus, eucalyptus oil, and oil of wintergreen are all aversive smells to cats. Soak pieces of cloth or cotton balls in these smelly substances and place them where you don't want your cat to go.

Tastes: bitter apple, citrus products, hot sauces, or cayenne pepper can be rubbed on the surface your cat is chewing on. They will associate the bad taste with the item.

Sound: A strategically placed motion detector that sounds an alarm or a product called Ssscat which is a can of compressed air with a motion detector on top that spritzes out a burst of air when the cat comes near can be helpful. These events are designed to simply startle your cat, not terrify her, but this may not be the best method if you have a particularly sensitive cat.

The key to owning a wonderful pet is to reinforce behaviors you like. Don't forget to reward kitty when she is sleeping in an acceptable place, scratching on the scratching post, or playing with the appropriate toy.