

No More Homeless Pets Forum

Date: December 12–16, 2005

Topic: Potty Problems



Want to help animals in danger of being relinquished due to house-training issues? At your wits' end with a critter who thinks the floor is an outhouse? Helen Colombo and Dilara Parry of the San Francisco SPCA are #1 (or is it #2?) when it comes to solving potty problems!

Introduction from Dilara Parry and Helen Colombo

Inappropriate elimination is one of the bigger issues that causes people to give up their pets, or live an uncomfortable life trying to "manage" the problem. Whether feline or canine, the pets who share our lives and our homes are sometimes prone to, well, messes! In many cases, people make erroneous assumptions about the cause, the most common of which is "She's doing it out of spite!" We will tackle these myths and more in our upcoming forum.

So, bring on the questions: Do you have a kitty who pees in sinks? Or, worse yet, your bed? Can older dogs who have been "backyard dogs" be house-trained? How about stray kitties? Can female cats spray? What's the best way to house-train a puppy?

If you are part of a rescue organization, you may have questions about adopting out pets who have manifested inappropriate elimination in previous homes. For instance, can they be successfully placed?

We welcome these and any other questions as we tackle this not-always-pleasant-but definitely-part-of-life aspect of pet ownership!

Bio for Helen Colombo

Helen Colombo is the manager of the Dog Behavior and Training Department at the San Francisco SPCA. A lifelong animal lover and dog-training enthusiast, Helen left the business world to work at the SF/SPCA. She has been employed as a dog trainer at the SF/SPCA since 1998. She graduated with honors from the SF/SPCA Dog Training Academy in 1999.

As manager of the dog behavior department and lead dog trainer, Helen oversees staff trainers, interns, volunteers, public dog-training classes and dog adoptions. In 2002, she was instrumental in creating the Lifelinks Program, which she now coordinates. This program works with other Northern California shelters and rescue groups to transfer adoptable dogs to the SF/SPCA.

Helen is a native San Franciscan who shares her home with a human family of three, two beloved canines, a parakeet, a rabbit and four goldfish.

Bio for Dilara Parry

Dilara Parry is the cat behavior program coordinator for the San Francisco SPCA. She grew up in Istanbul, Turkey, where the multitudes of homeless animals inspired in her a concern for animal welfare and informed her choice of careers. She has degrees in psychology and comparative literature from Oberlin College.

She has been at the SF/SPCA for the past 11 years. She has conducted many workshops and written published articles on cat behavior issues. The SF/SPCA and the Maddie's Adoption Center have provided a perfect setting for hands-on learning. She spends her workdays evaluating cats for intake and adoption, counseling adopters and other members of the public, working with cat rescue organizations, and writing.

She and her co-workers have developed a comprehensive temperament testing and rating system for shelter cats, which they presented at the 2003 CHAMP conference. Some of her favorite feline challenges include feral kittens, aggressive cats, and human/animal communication issues.

She and her family of dogs, cats, and humans live in Richmond, California.

Making sure cat doesn't poop on the floor in her new home!

Question from Liz: Cassie is a lovely, one-year old cat who is friendly and playful. At our rescue as a kitten, she had soft stool and sometimes went outside the litter box. She always used the box for urination. She was adopted by someone who knew her issues and they say they tried everything to retrain her, but were eventually forced to return her. I believe they did work very hard to help her.

When she returned to the rescue, we began to retrain her by putting her in a small cage with only the litter box and no newspaper or cloth. After a few weeks, we moved the cage into a one-cat pen and after about a week, we opened the cage door, leaving her free to roam the pen. We left the litter box in the cage with the door open. We also gave her a three-week course of Flagyl and her stool is now normal. She has had few accidents in this process and none in the last month. We removed the cage about three weeks ago. The pen now has towels for bedding also (previously, she had gone to the bathroom under bedding).

My question is this: Assuming we can find someone willing to take a chance on her, what can her adopter do to help ensure that she will remain accident-free? Do you think she needs to be an only cat? Her previous home had an older, non-aggressive cat and they got along fine, but we wonder if that had something to do with her problems. It doesn't seem to be a dirty litter box issue, by the way. Her box is always kept clean.

Response from Dilara Parry: This case demonstrates a very common case for feline inappropriate elimination, which is a medical problem. When cats have uncomfortable experiences in the litter box, they often start avoiding it. As in Cassie's case, if they are having "poop problems" they will often continue to urinate in the box. Your retraining steps sound great: Fix the medical problem, and give the kitty limited options (in this case, by keeping her in a cage) so that she is encouraged to try using the dreaded litter box for #2, and give it enough time so that she decides it is not causing her any

discomfort and a new habit can be established. Did Cassie have diagnostic work to determine why she had soft stool? Was it a type of parasite, or undetermined cause? My concern would be that if she has some kind of intestinal sensitivity (irritable bowel issues), this may recur. Sometimes finding the right diet can be the answer.

I don't think Cassie's elimination problems had anything to do with the other kitty, especially as the two cats got along well. A home with another cat would be fine to consider! The new adopters should plan on starting Cassie off in a small room such as a bathroom, and monitor her litter box usage for a few days before giving her access to the rest of the home. They should be sent home with whatever Cassie is eating (providing she is not having soft stool!), and told to keep her on the same food if she continues to do well. If she has soft stool again, they should be willing to work closely with a veterinarian to determine the cause of the problem. She sounds like she has a winning personality, so hopefully someone will want to adopt her!

What's up with pets who pee on people?

Question from Andy: What's up with dogs (and cats) who pee on people? Why do they do that, and how can it be prevented? Here are just a few examples that I've heard about:

- A male Australian shepherd (who was unneutered at the time) lifted his leg on his new foster mom and peed on her leg. He only did it once, when he first arrived.
- A sensitive pariah (bottom rung on the totem pole) cat was attacked by a new, dominant cat. Her immediate response was to climb on the bed where her human mom lay sleeping ... and pee on her head!
- A large, happy dog met someone new at an adoption outreach event. He was jumping all over the place and peeing at the same time – including on the person he was introduced to!

Response from Dilara Parry: Well, let me address the cat side of this question. It isn't that common for cats to pee on people, but it isn't unheard of either; in fact, one of my own kitties did this once! It tends to be when a kitty is stressed out (as in Andy's example) or occasionally when a cat is having a medical problem such as a urinary tract infection (this was the case with my baby).

Why do they do it? We only have theories, one of which is that this harkens back to when the mom cat cleans and expresses the urine and feces from the teeny kittens, a time of security for the kitten. So perhaps when they target people who take care of them, they are trying to feel secure. If this sounds a little too "psych-talk"-ish, then consider the release of urine onto a safe target as a marking behavior. (The cat may be thinking, "Everything else may be off limits, but this is mine!") And one other factor in this case is that the kitty may have had problems accessing the litter box due to the bullying cat, and thus may have had a very full bladder, and released it once she got to "safety."

Of course, cats (and dogs ... and humans, come to think of it!) can simply lose control of their bladder in cases of extreme fear. This is a nervous system response. This would be the reason if, for instance, a feral kitten urinates or defecates when you catch her.

In terms of working with this problem, or preventing it, as always, it will depend on the cause. I always recommend a urinalysis and vet exam when a cat urinates outside the litter box. In this case, the household cat dynamics will need some work, perhaps by boosting the confidence of the "underdog" (my favorite way of doing this is through interactive play, but there are a few other tricks) and trying to ensure easy access to the litter box. Also, the owners should never yell at or punish the kitty for this behavior, since that can cause more stress, and ultimately may lead to more problems.

Response from Helen Colombo: And I will address the dog side of things!

1) Many un-neutered and neutered male dogs will lift their leg to "scent mark" an object, other dog or person. Many male dogs like to scent mark vertical surfaces. A dog urinates because some external or internal stimulus causes them to urinate. It is usually an increased level of testosterone or because they smell another animal's urine. Castration may or may not solve the problem immediately. Castration, along with a behavior modification plan and management, will work best to solve this problem.

One technique that often helps scent markers can be used during leash walks. Teaching the dog a verbal cue to scent mark (which will allow them to stop, sniff and scent mark) is a valuable tool for a dog that marks. This helps curb the tendency to lift a leg on every vertical object they encounter. Installing a verbal cue right before you allow this behavior will help build the habit of waiting for a cue before they act.

When on leash walks, stop before the dog scent marks, give a verbal cue (an "okay" or another word) and allow slack on the leash to let the dog sniff and scent mark. This cue should only be used for scent marking and not normal house-training behavior. (You can use different verbal cues for each.) Do not allow the dog to mark unless you have said the verbal cue. You will need to practice this often, so you will give the cue numerous times on a walk to allow the dog to make the connection between the verbal cue and the freedom to scent mark.

This will not transfer over easily to off-leash marking, so leash management is a must. If you own a dog who marks often, management is the key, especially when in new environments, meeting new people in your home, or at other people's homes.

Catch the behavior before it happens by reading your dog's body language. When you're in an indoor environment or meeting new people, teach your dog to sit-stay to keep him from sniffing around. (A sit stay is an incompatible behavior with lifting his leg.) Remember to never scold or get angry at your dog when inappropriate scent marking occurs, since it is a hard-wired behavior.

2) Some dogs, mostly puppies, can have excitement urination, even if they're otherwise house-trained. It can be caused by lack of bladder control, or a full bladder that has not been emptied before the dog becomes excited. Because it can be caused by lack of bladder control, some older dogs may also exhibit excitement urination.

Make sure the dog has an opportunity to go to the bathroom before the stimulating situation, such as meeting people or playing with other dogs. Expose the dog to a stimulus that excites him many times to help decrease the "excitement factor." Ignore the dog initially rather than getting him riled up, and teach him to sit for greetings, to help him learn to settle more easily.

Remember to never scold or get angry at your dog when excitement urination occurs, since it will only make the problem worse.

Murphy, use your wee-wee pads, not the carpet!

Question from a member: My wee friend Murphy has a lot of potty issues. He is a Chihuahua mix, around 6-7 years old. Murphy has seizures and some degree of brain damage. Carpet is the same as a wee-wee pad to Murphy. He has just started weeing and pooping on my treadmill mat. He will come home from a nice, long walk and pee and poop on the carpet. He came to live with us about a year and a half ago, and we don't know his history. He also likes to snack on poop – his own, the cats' and what he finds outside. I am committed to keeping him, as he was cast out twice before.

Response from Helen Colombo: Murphy is definitely a special little guy. Because of his brain damage, I would err on the side of complete management and lots of feedback for this little guy.

He may be too distracted while on his walk and not think about his business, or he may be overwhelmed by his walk. If he never goes to the bathroom on walks, he may not have been trained that way, or he may be too overwhelmed to go potty while on walks. In either case, make sure he is confined or with you when he returns home from the walk. Take him back out immediately for a potty break, or put him in a confined area with his potty pads.

Feedback is so important. When he does his business in the right place, praise him immediately and give him yummy treats. Only give negative feedback IF you catch him in the act. Say "Oh no," and take him directly to his appropriate potty spot.

One hundred percent supervision is a must and he cannot be allowed access to spots he will use as a potty. This means that when he is outside his doggie confinement area, you must keep him close to you or cut off access to tempting areas, with lots of potty breaks to his correct potty spot in between.

You may want to ask the vet about diet and any supplements to help decrease the poop eating. Good luck, and I am happy Mr. Murphy has finally found a true guardian.

Too many cats for comfort

Question from a member: One of my favorite cats started peeing on my bed (but only where I lay), my pillow and in my house shoes. I can keep the cat out of the bedroom all night, but within 30 minutes of him getting in the room he will pee on one of the above. He has been in my home his whole life and was raised with the other four cats that live here. This just started a few months ago and is driving me crazy. He is fixed, as are all the cats, and is about 20 months old, as are all the cats.

I do animal rescue and occasionally keep a litter of kittens in my extra room, as I've done since I got all my cats. This just became an issue about two rescue litters ago. I'm not sure but I also think it is him that occasionally sprays on my kitchen counter. Any

suggestions? At this point, I'm ready to find him a new home because he obviously isn't happy here.

Response from Dilara Parry: By the end of the week, I will sound like a broken record on this point, but a vet visit (make sure they do a urinalysis) is definitely in order here, as with all inappropriate urination. There are some new products on the market for households with multiple cats. For example, to determine who is urinating on the counters, you can give them a pill (available through a vet) so that one cat's urine is colored, and thus distinct from the rest of your kitties. This is essential for determining if some other kitty is also having problems, which of course can be pretty serious, especially in male neutered cats, who are most susceptible to being "blocked," a life-threatening condition.

Assuming this is a behavioral issue: Much as we animal rescue people want to keep fostering and rescuing, sometimes our pets do not agree with us. Cats in particular are quite territorial, and 20 months is right at the beginning of true adulthood for a male cat (even if neutered).

The number of cats may be too many for the living area and, as they are all the same age, the dynamics may be changing as they move from youngsters to adults. Observe their interactions during any new skirmishes; maybe someone's play is getting a little bit of an "edge" to it, or you notice one of the kitties newly targeting a specific sibling, for example.

You can increase living space cat-wise by adding more cat trees (you can never have too many!) and other cat-friendly spaces. One easy way to do this is to clear off the tops of sturdy furniture such as bookcases, and allow cats to perch on those. You can even make them more appealing by tacking on some fleece material (just don't tell Martha Stewart!).

Make sure they have plenty of litter boxes (one per cat and then one more is the ideal). They should not be clustered in one room or area, but rather in different rooms. Exercise is often underrated for cats: Make sure all cats are getting adequate playtime by scheduling sessions of interactive play daily. One example I love is Da Bird (go to www.thecatconnection.com/Da-Bird-Cat-Teaser.html). Just make sure to lock it away when you are not supervising play.

Feliway (www.feliway.com), a calming artificial-pheromone preparation, is also definitely worth a try. I prefer the plug-in "comfort zone" for this type of situation.

Try to keep targeted items out of reach – such as shoes in the closet, dirty laundry in covered hampers, etc. A tarp or a large shower curtain can be spread on the bed to minimize the damage. Enzyme cleaners such as Anti-Icky-Poo can be used to try and get the odor out of soiled areas.

Those of us "in the biz" often have to make some tough decisions: Do we rehome some of our own kitties who don't like the multi-cat life? Should we just learn to put up with the marking that comes along with having many cats? Do we stop fostering, and instead perhaps concentrate on volunteering in different ways (trapping feral kitties, working on adoption days, etc.)? These are, of course, personal decisions that no one can make for you. However, many of the above suggestions will be only temporary band-aids and not

address the cause of the stress. A marking cat is an anxious one, and before I would consider things such as anti-anxiety medication, I would try to eliminate causes of stress (such as litters of foster kittens).

"Don't throw me out – it was an accident!"

Question from Jenny: What a great topic! A situation recently presented itself and I've been at a loss as to how I should best deal with this: A friend of mine with two adult dogs (one a mixed breed and the other a Weimaraner who have lived together for many years without incident and without any recent or significant changes in the home) is very – maybe overly – "housekeeping" conscious.

Recently, the Weimaraner has had a series of urinating accidents that occurred when my friend was late in getting home. These few accidents have prompted her to contemplate permanently removing the dog from the home primarily because she can't/won't tolerate the mess. It's my belief that the owner's behavior caused the dog's multiple accidents, but she doesn't see it that way. Her rationale is that if the dog can control his bladder for 8-9 hours while sleeping at night he should be able to have that same control while awake during the day. This is not a reasonable assumption; however, she believes it.

While it's easy to say, "This type of person shouldn't have a dog," that's not the reality and so my question is: How can friends help change the mindset of this type of pet owner (without offending them) to one of understanding and compassion so that corrective action, along with ruling out any medical problems, such as bladder stones, may be implemented in place of the perception that a pet who has accidents is a disposable nuisance?

Response from Helen Colombo: Thanks for your concern to help out your friend and her dog. It is sad that your friend mentions these extreme measures because of these accidents. Just beware, she may not be interested in your advice, but I would try to help out anyway.

Yes, checking with a vet is a must for a dog without previous house-training problems. The dog may have a medical condition that needs to be addressed. The dog's age may also play a part in the house-training accidents. As you probably know, when dogs sleep their metabolism slows down just as ours does, but sometimes as we get older even humans need a potty break during the night. The dog may only be able to hold his bladder for a maximum of 9 hours. Your friend's dog may need an extra potty break during these long days.

Has anything changed in the dog's life besides the longer days? And, is the dog only having accidents when your friend arrives late? There are many questions to be answered, but I would give these suggestions:

Can the dog have indoor/outdoor access, or can a friend to stop by and let the dogs out when the owner is going to come home late? Make sure the dog urinates before the owner leaves for the day. Mealtime may need to be adjusted on the days your friend works late. If the dog is free-fed (food bowl left out 24/7), he may be nibbling throughout the day and drinking water more often, so this will affect the need to eliminate more

often. Or maybe the dog is fed right before your friend leaves for work and will need to go to the bathroom sooner. Your friend may need to change the mealtime to adjust to her dog's elimination schedule when she is away for longer hours.

Sharing your life with a companion animal has its ups and downs. There are many changes over the lifetime of an animal and it is sometimes difficult for individuals to handle these issues, especially if there are any added stresses in their lives. Voicing extreme actions may actually be her way of asking for help. Continue to offer a listening ear; feedback of useful information and support will be the best approach. Offer to help out (if you can) and let her know that these behaviors often happen even in an adult or house-trained dog.

The SF/SPCA has an extensive online library of handouts for many dog behaviors. Find out more at www.sfspca.org/behavior/dog_library/index_library.shtml. SF/SPCA also has a behavior hotline that is available free of charge; the number is (415) 901-6646. Thank you for being such a good friend. I hope your friend is able to resolve this issue very soon. Good luck!

Submissive wetting

Question from a member: You have not mentioned what we call "submissive wetting." That seems to happen (at least to us) when an adult dog (in our case, a rescue) is especially fearful. In our experience, it happens more often when the dog encounters a man. Can you please talk a little bit about this?

Response from Helen Colombo: Fearful and/or undersocialized dogs can present the behavior known as submissive urination. This type of urination occurs when you, someone else, or another dog is interacting with the dog. Submissive urination is usually small amounts of urine, but if the bladder is full or the dog is extremely fearful, they may relieve themselves completely. This behavior can be exhibited by dogs of any age, both male and female. Puppies often can grow out of it with proper positive handling and training. It is usually due to one or a combination of the following: lack of proper socialization, genetic predisposition toward submissive urination, or a fear response due to a negative past experience (such as severe or inappropriate punishment).

In all cases of submissive urination, the guardian should schedule a visit to the vet for a full medical checkup to rule out any medical problems. It is important to remember not to yell, become angry or punish your dog when this behavior occurs.

You identified men as a trigger for this behavior. It is very important to identify the stimulus in order to help your pet overcome this problem. Is it when you call the dog, pick him up, lean over him, pet him, restrain him, when you first come home, only when a stranger meets or pets him? It is important to document any time this happens so you can identify the context and situations when your dog is fearful.

Here are some general procedures you can do to help your pet overcome this problem:

- Make sure your dog gets plenty of exercise and healthy food.
- Make sure your dog goes directly outside when you arrive home (to eliminate a full bladder and avoid accidents in the home). Ignore the dog and don't make eye contact for several minutes. When you greet him, keep calm and lower your body

to the dog's level, avoiding staring and lots of excitement. Reward greetings with treats, calm praise and calm play with a toy or a game of fetch (if your dog enjoys this). Practice this scenario often to help your dog build confidence. Always reward your dog with a tasty treat whenever he approaches you or in situations in which he is usually fearful.

- Practice with family members and guests who visit your home. Before any introduction, allow the dog to relieve himself. Once inside, make sure family members or guests ignore him for a short length of time – 5-15 minutes. They should avoid eye contact but offer treats when the dog approaches. They should not lean over the dog, but lower their body to the dog's level. If the dog is taking treats, and solicits attention, the person may scratch under the chin, and speak calmly to the dog. Once the dog settles, you can request a sit for the treat. Make sure your dog gets several potty breaks in between meeting new people. Practice this as often as possible.
- Do not punish or scold your dog, as this will only increase the problem.
- Enroll the dog in a positive-reinforcement training class. Positive training methods are a must for this type of dog. A positive training class will teach your dog basic behaviors and help build his confidence. Gently expose your dog to as many situations as you can and include positive reinforcement with all interactions.

Patience is a must, as this can be a slow process. Taking small steps with positive results will make for long-lasting success. Remember to be consistent and positive with all of your training.

Not going over the edge when kitty goes over the edge

Question from Crystal: My elderly (16 years) cat Stella has "bad aim" and pees right outside the box instead of inside it. She will step into the box but the pee lands outside. I switched to a box with lower sides (I thought she was having trouble because of her arthritis) but it didn't help much. I use unscented Swheat Scoop scoopable litter and keep the boxes clean so I don't think it's litter aversion! What to do to help Stella "aim to please"?

Response from Dilara Parry: Kudos to you for trying to work with your elderly cat's litter box issue. Stella's arthritis is certainly a possible cause, as the joints involved with squatting properly may be painful and stiff. Is Stella on medication for this problem?

Have you tried a covered box? Many cats do not like them, but some cats don't mind, and it may help in this case, especially if your kitty is not very large. Here's what I would do, so as to not make the problem worse: Add a covered litter box, leaving the one she has as well. That way you are not forcing the change on her, but just observing if she will in fact use one. Some cats prefer the texture of plain clumping clay litter, so, much as I like the more environmentally friendly litters like Swheat Scoop, the cats have their own ideas. So if this is a recent litter change, you may want to switch back.

Another option is to borrow from the dogs! The corner dog litter boxes are a possibility here; they have a low entrance and higher sides, and the shape may be an advantage. Sometimes thinking "outside the box" is useful when trying to find the perfect litter box.

Perhaps try a large low Tupperware container? Some people have had success with a setup such as "box within a box," with the inner box being filled with litter, and the outer being empty.

If all else fails, simply managing the problem is also possible in this case. Using a rubber mat or even some layers of newspaper under the litter box can help with cleanup; even better options are cat paper (www.catpaper.com) or large puppy-pads, as those will absorb the urine. Best of luck to you and Stella.

Small dogs with potty problems

Question from a member: I have two miniature pinschers; Charley is a male about 10 years old and Casey is a female who is 6 years old. I found Charley about four years ago and I adopted Casey two years ago. Neither are housebroken. I keep them in the kitchen during the day when I am at work. I know it's a long day, 10 hours, and I put potty pads on the floor. Most of the time they go on the potty pads, but a lot of the time they miss the potty pad.

Casey will potty and poop when I am home. When I am home, they go out every two hours and I don't understand why she does this. I have a gate to keep them out of the front room, but it seems if she is in there she will go on the carpet. My recreation is in the basement and that is where we are most of the time. Casey will run upstairs and potty in the kitchen. They both potty during the night, so I put their leashes on and hook it up to the bed, where they sleep with me at night. I love them both and never in a million years would give them up, but it sure would be nice to go through one day without cleaning up a mess. It would also be nice to not have to chain them to the bed at night. Can you help?

Response from Helen Colombo: I consulted with one of the SF/SPCA staff trainers who specialize in small dog training. When you are away and the dogs are in the confinement area, she suggested either putting the potty pads into a frame of some sort to clearly define the acceptable area, or using a doggie litter box in lieu of the pads. Put the potty pads in the litter box and show your dog the box for potty breaks. You may have to use food to lure the dog into the box, or pick the dog up and put him into the litter box. Most potty-pad-trained dogs are never 100% successfully house-trained, as they sometimes create a "potty area" for themselves. Use of the litter box may help decrease the "missing the potty pad" incidents.

When you are home, Casey will need supervised practice in the front room to avoid accidents. Slowly increase the length of time between outings from 2 hours to 2 hours and 15 minutes, and on and on until they reach 5 hours. Teaching both of the dogs to potty on a verbal cue is always helpful. You start by saying the verbal cue (such as "go potty") as the dog is ready to eliminate. Eventually you can tell them "go potty" when they are outside, so they have a cue of what they should be doing. Feedback to both dogs is a must. Remember to praise and give treats when these little guys go to the bathroom in the appropriate areas. If you catch them in the act, you can tell them, "Oh no," and quickly take them to the appropriate potty area.

For the evening, the food and water should be picked up earlier to help prevent accidents during the night. Crate training should be started for both dogs. Casey and

Charley can be crated overnight in your bedroom. For more information on house-training and crate training, go to the SF/SPCA website at www.sfspca.org/behavior/dog_library/index_library.shtml.

You are on the right track, so keep up the good training. Good luck with these little guys!

Question from a member: I have a 6-year-old cavalier King Charles spaniel who was released to rescue by a puppy miller. He's terrified of most everything, but very attached to me. He was neutered the week before he came to me. In the first hour in our house, he marked more than half a dozen times – door posts, furniture corners, the other dogs, even my female cavalier's favorite sofa cushion. With constant attention, frequent trips outside and crate time, he has stopped marking, except that when my alpha cavalier finishes eating, he marks her empty bowl! Any tips?

Response from Helen Colombo: Congratulations on your great progress and for saving this little guy's life! The best thing to do about the food bowl marking is to manage the situation. Watch the dogs as they finish eating and catch him before he marks her bowl; call him over to you and reward him for not marking her food bowl. Other suggestions: Feed the dogs separately, or feed the female dog first and then feed the male afterward so that he has an exciting thing to be doing (eating) once she has finished. Both food dishes should be picked up right away.

To help build his confidence, enroll him in a positive-reinforcement training class. If you can find one that specializes in small breed dogs, that would be even better!

Positive-reinforcement training methods are very beneficial for the shy or small breed dog. The class will teach your dog basic behaviors and help build his confidence. For more general dog behavior information, go to the SF/SPCA website link at www.sfspca.org/behavior/dog_library/index_library.shtml. You have done a wonderful job so far. I hope the information above is helpful and will resolve the food bowl problem.

Can spraying tom come in from the garage?

Question from a member: Thanks for addressing this topic. I have a male, 16-year-old neutered cat who pees on tile and sprays (usually on the inside of the garage door, as he spends the night in the garage). He has had a urinating problem most of his adult life, which is why he sees a lot of garage time. My old house was carpeted and he then would use the tub, sink and carpet corners. He has repeatedly gone to vets to rule out urinary problems; none were found. I have three other cats in the house (2,500 square feet) and I foster kittens (usually kept in a kitten room). The problem pre-dates the kitten fostering. He dislikes the female cats but is fine with the other male (my mother's cat).

I have tried to isolate him in a small room, like the bathroom, and he will still pee wherever. I've tried caging him, which he really hates, and that does fix the problem, until I let him out, then it is back to the old ways. He defecates in the litter box always. I work full time and rarely catch him ... although when I do he runs around the house and plays as if this is a game of chase. Do I have to resign myself to this continued behavior, or do you think there might be a solution? I honestly think he's waiting for me to go so he can pee on my grave.

Response from Dilara Parry: Well, at 16 years of age, it is tough to change preferences that have been going on for many years. The fact that he does not use the box even when he is by himself and confined to a small room makes me think that there is a "surface preference" and not merely a marking behavior going on with your kitty.

Assuming he was not declawed (I hope), there are many other reasons cats develop such preferences. The places you have described – sinks, tubs, corners – are places that I would say cats can consider "alternate litter boxes." Maybe at some point the box wasn't clean enough for his taste, or he didn't want to tangle with another kitty so he chose to go elsewhere ... and liked it!

Offering him a "smorgasbord" of different types of substrate while he is confined to a small room may be an interesting experiment. Try a few of these: hamster bedding, potting soil, unscented clumping litter with Dr. Elsey's "Cat Attract," shredded newspaper, alongside of your usual litter, all in separate boxes. If we can figure out something that he would actually prefer, we will have won half the battle. Then it is a matter of keeping him confined until he is regularly using that box, and gradually allowing access to the rest of the house.

I would recommend using a blacklight to find the spots where he has been urinating over the years, and trying to eliminate the odor with heavy-duty enzyme cleaners during his confinement period. (Turn the regular lights off and shine the blacklight a few feet away from the carpet, moving it around until you find brightly glowing urine.)

You bring up an important aspect of litter box problems in cats: Correction. I am often asked what you can do if you catch a cat in the act, and my answer is a frustrating yet consistent "Nothing." While we are sorely tempted at times to yell, jump up and down, grab the kitty and take her to the litter box, and so on, I can assure you that these will make matters worse, not better. This is a time to exercise restraint at all costs, bite your lip, clench your fists, but don't direct the anger at the kitty!

Placing a cat in a litter box is also not recommended in most situations. They know where the box is, and again, there is a reason that they are not using it. Unless we fix the cause, the problem is unlikely to go away. For many cats, the more emphasis that is placed on the litter box (putting them in it, excessive praise while they are in it, etc.), the more likely they will avoid it. Making the litter box very appealing location-wise and substrate-wise, and keeping it super-clean are things we can do, regardless of why the cat is eliminating elsewhere.

If you decide to try and let him back in the house, then, along with the steps above, anti-anxiety medications may be a possibility as well. Comfort Zone by Feliway is worth trying. (As one member mentioned, it does occasionally backfire, but you will know pretty quickly if yours is one of those infrequent cases.)

The cat-to-cat issues are going to need some work. This may be more than we can address in this forum, and working one-on-one with a behaviorist is recommended for complicated cases such as yours, where there are litter box issues and cat-cat issues. You can call our hotline at (415) 554-3075 to receive free handouts, and details about our consultation process (we, the SF/SPCA, have a referral list as well). Your vet or local shelter may also be able to recommend more resources for you.

Question from Barb: I have a 12-year-old male neutered cat that has always sprayed on everything in sight. He was an outdoor cat that showed up one day so I don't know his history. I have had him for approximately seven years. He has had to live in the garage with a cat door. He goes in and out all day and is locked in at night. I would love to have him live inside the house with my other three cats, but my husband will not allow him to spray on one more thing. I feel really bad for him – it's cold, he's lonely and it is not safe outside. Is there anything at all that can be done to help with his constant spraying?

Response from Dilara Parry: He does sound like a tough case, and it is possible that this is why he was on the streets to begin with. Some cats are very insecure, and they feel an overwhelming need to mark everything new, and then refresh the scent every few days.

Providing a medical cause has been ruled out, you could try antidepressant/anti-anxiety medication. Look for a vet who has experience in this arena – or possibly even try an online consultation with an experienced veterinary behaviorist, such as the Tufts behavior clinic (www.tufts.edu/vet/petfax/). Even if you're using behavioral pharmacotherapy, you will still want to get to the heart of the initial cause of the problem so that it doesn't keep re-occurring if the cat is taken off the medication. For example, if it is related to the other cats in the home, then improving this cat's interactions with the other cats can be helpful in reducing the need for the cat to spray.

If the consult is not possible, take solace in the fact that you are giving him shelter, food, and love – which is better than what many cats in this situation will get. Make the garage as pleasant for him as you can, perhaps setting up a space for yourself (TV? knitting? a book corner?) in the garage so that you are more likely to spend an hour or two out there keeping him company, with a space heater if the weather is cold. One safe option to provide warmth overnight is SnuggleSafe: www.snugglesafe.co.uk/heatpad.htm.

You may also be able to work out letting him into the house for an hour or two each day while keeping an eye on him.

When cats "go" on cold, hard surfaces

Question from Lelania: I have a 13-year-old Persian cat named Sebastian. Since he was a young adult, he's had "issues" with peeing elsewhere in the house ... but usually for no particular reason, and it's very sporadic. He could go months without doing it, or he could do it repeatedly for a few days or weeks. He usually chooses area rugs that have rubber backing on them, but years ago he peed in corners or even on our couch we used to have.

He's been in the hospital twice for clogging up urinary-wise, and we've had him catheterized, but hasn't had the surgery (that's a last resort). He hasn't had any trouble with that for about a year and a half now.

His latest thing is peeing in the sink or bathtub (or an area rug if I happen to leave one down). My husband and I swear he does this out of spite. (This is the cat who has to be anesthetized to be shaved down because he won't let us groom/brush him.)

Please help! We're building a house and my husband says he won't tolerate Sebastian "ruining" our new home.

Response from Dilara Parry: Thanks for writing, Lelania. Sebastian may have "cattitude" about his grooming, but I can assure you the sink and tub peeing is not out of spite! Much as I love cats, I don't believe they are capable of such a complicated mental process. Now, if a human roommate was doing this, I may agree with you! Years of dealing with Sebastian's messes have understandably been hard for you and your husband, but it is important to realize he is not doing this to hurt you.

Though Sebastian is not currently getting "blocked," he may still have some medical issues that need to be addressed. Has he had a recent urinalysis? Is he on a special diet? Some cats with urinary crystals seem to do better on a diet of canned food only, something you could discuss with your veterinarian. Cats who are having the burning sensations associated with urinary tract problems often seek out cool surfaces such as a sink. The sporadic nature that you describe, with no special trigger, also suggests a medical cause to me.

Of course, when a cat has been choosing other places to urinate for so much of his life, there is also the "habit factor." He needs to get used to going in the box again, which may only be possible via confinement and giving him different substrates to see what he prefers. If you confine him in the bathroom, you can fill the sink and bathtub with a few inches of water to prevent him from urinating or defecating in these places. However, make sure that the faucets aren't dripping so that you don't accidentally end up with overflow.

One other thing: Many cats are attracted to urinating on rubber-backed mats or carpets. This is thought to be because the chemicals that these carpets are treated with may smell like cat urine to the cat. They also are very hard to get the "real" cat urine smell out of. Many cat owners simply put away or hang up the bath mats when they are done with their showers, as it is such a common problem.

In my work, I run into Persian and Himalayan cats who have these problems at a higher rate than other cats. Why is this? Well, part of it may be the "hair factor." Cats do not like to drag their hair through litter and such, so a "bootie trim" (where they clip the hair around his private parts) is always worth a try. Part of it may in fact be a genetic predisposition, though of course there are many Persians with good litter box habits.

When you move your cat into your new home, start by confining him to a small room with food, water and a litter box. This will help re-establish litter box habits and allow him time to adjust to his new surroundings. Make sure he's using the litter box consistently for a few weeks before allowing him to have access to the rest of the house.

On again, off again house-training issues

Question from Debi: We fostered and ended up adopting a 1-2 year old male great Dane mix in June who originally came from animal control. We have had a very hard time house-breaking him and figure this is why he ended up at the pound in the first place. He was neutered when we got him and is dog number 5 in our home. They all get along fine. He was apparently abused at some point (probably due to this problem).

One of the initial tests the vet did showed that his urine is not concentrating and she said to limit his water intake, which we have done. We also let him out frequently when we are home (once an hour, sometimes sooner) and every time he goes to the bathroom he pees FOREVER! He will go 2-3 weeks and then have accidents for a few days in a row and be fine again for a couple of weeks. We have checked him for UTI and even went as far as an ultrasound to rule out any tumors, etc. He continues to "come out of his shell" and we love him and don't want to give up on him! Any suggestions? Thanks!

Response from Helen Colombo: Thanks for taking the time to help out this big guy. There is a medical issue, but I am not sure of the effect it has on his house-training. When you say he goes 2-3 weeks without accidents, does that mean a normal schedule? If yes, you should try to document the timeline and record the accidents to see if there are any changes in his daily routine during those inconsistent days. Make sure you are giving him lots of feedback: praise and yummy treats every time he goes in the correct area. Lots of supervision when he is in the home with you. If you catch him circling or starting to urinate, startle him gently with a "Oh no, let's go outside" type of verbal feedback. He should go outside immediately.

If you cannot give him 100% supervision when he is in the home, he should be in his doggie confinement area. It is sometimes difficult to re-train a dog for proper house-training especially if we are unsure of the dog's history and behavior or medical issues. Supervision and management is a must in these cases. I would also check out medical or breed-specific forums in regard to his bladder. I am sure you can find out more information on the medical side.

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