

Preventing Behavior Problems in Your Cat

By Sheila Segurson, DVM

A new kitten will provide you with hours of entertainment and fun. But, your cute kitten will soon turn into an adult cat. To ensure a long and pleasurable relationship with your cat, you should learn about typical feline behavior and how to prevent behavior problems from happening. Behavior problems are one of the most common reasons that adult cats are relinquished to shelters and, because they're not as cute as kittens, they are much less likely to find new homes.



House soiling, aggression and scratching are the most common cat behavioral problems. Most cat behavior problems are normal behavior – for a cat. Unfortunately, they are unacceptable to many of us. Our cats, however, often do not know what we have designated as unacceptable behavior.

There are several steps you can take to decrease the likelihood that your cute kitten will turn into an adult cat with behavior problems:

Expose your kitten to a lot of different experiences. Kittens are better able than adult cats to adapt to environmental changes. If you expose your kitten to anything and everything she may come into contact with as an adult, you will have much less chance of ending up with a fearful cat. Strive to make these exposures positive experiences; teach your kitten that all these strange, new things are nothing to be afraid of. She should be introduced to different ages, sizes and sexes of people; her cat carrier; other animals; and different environments.

Associate these new experiences with things your kitty likes, such as playtime or food treats. For example, place a special cat treat or a small bowl of moist cat food in her carrier several times a week. This experience will increase the likelihood that she will readily enter the carrier as an adult.

Teach your kitten to scratch in appropriate places. Cats scratch in order to refresh and sharpen their claws. Teaching your kitten to scratch in appropriate places and to accept nail trimming can help prevent damage to your furniture. Buy several scratching surfaces or scratching posts and place them in several prominent areas of the house. Place containers of special treats in the rooms with the scratching posts. When your kitten scratches on the post, say “good girl” and reward her with a treat. To reinforce the message, you can also pet her while she’s at the scratching post; stroking her back will encourage her to knead her paws. You can move the scratching posts to a more convenient location after she’s been using the posts regularly.

Keep the litter box very clean. Cats tend to be fastidious, so keeping the litter box clean decreases the likelihood that your kitty will urinate or defecate outside the box as

an adult. Scoop the box once a day and empty it completely every two weeks, refilling it to a depth of three inches.

Teach your kitten how to play “nice.” Play is a very important and fun part of a kitten’s life. Teaching your kitten proper play skills and playing with him every day will give him appropriate outlets for his energy. To decrease the chance that he will seek out human hands and feet as play toys, don’t ever play with your kitten with your hands and feet. In your kitten’s mind, a playful nip is indistinguishable from a painful bite. He will not understand that it’s not okay to chew on or bite people unless you teach him.

If your kitten plays with your hands or feet, make your hand or foot go limp (he’s more likely to continue attacking a moving object) and say “Ouch!” in a loud voice. Then, pull out an interactive toy, such as a feather attached to a wand, and play with him vigorously. You are teaching him that hands are no fun to play with, but interactive toys are great fun because they are a challenge.

Teach your cat a few basic commands. Many people believe that cats are untrainable, but cats are very smart and can learn commands and tricks quite rapidly if they are taught using positive reinforcement. More and more people are using clicker training to teach their cats basic commands and simple tricks. The earlier you start teaching your kitten, the more quickly she will learn. Training your kitten is a great way to provide your cat with exercise and improve your relationship with her, too.

Following these simple steps can potentially make the difference between a cat with behavior problems and a happy, well-adjusted cat. Remember, it is much easier to prevent problems than to treat them after they’ve become entrenched. If your kitty ever does develop a behavior problem, seek help from your local shelter or a behaviorist. Oftentimes, an experienced behaviorist can offer detailed, specific recommendations for you and your cat.

Sheila Segurson is a veterinary shelter medicine and behavior resident at the University of California at Davis School of Veterinary Medicine, Clinical Animal Behavior Service.