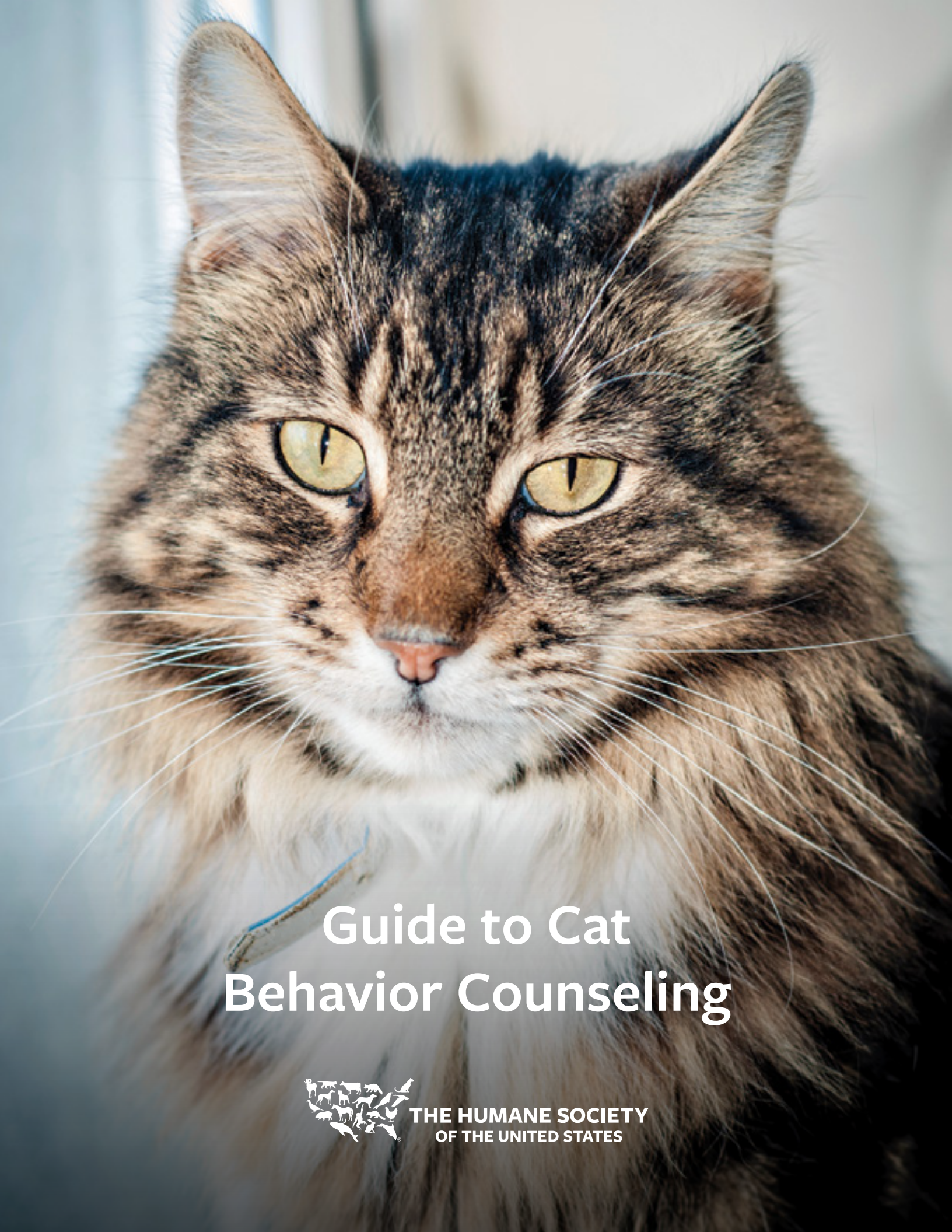




Guide to Cat Behavior Counseling



THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES



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Foreword

There's a new perspective emerging in the sheltering world that focuses on keeping pets in their homes. This strategy helps reduce intake so we can focus on the animals who truly need shelter and rescue, and it also helps build connections within our communities. It's from this new perspective that this *Guide to Cat Behavior Counseling* has developed.

Here's an example of this new perspective:

A cat owner calls a shelter or rescue and says, "I want to know where I can bring my cat. She keeps peeing all over my home."

The traditional response from many shelters and rescues is, "I'm sorry to hear that. We don't have any space right now. Have you tried these other shelters and rescues? Or we can put you on our waiting list."

Imagine if that same caller received the following reply from your organization: "I'm sorry to hear that your cat is peeing all over your home. That sounds very frustrating. I'm really glad you called our organization though, because we can provide you with free cat behavior counseling that is likely to resolve the problem so that you can keep your cat."

Cat behavior counseling is a natural extension of your work to protect animals in your community. In many cases, the cat is already in

a great home, so our task is to make sure the cat remains there by working with the owner to resolve the behavior issue. The goal of this guide is to train you to become an effective cat behavior counselor so that your organization can provide this invaluable resource to cat owners in your community. This is a three-step process:

- Understand the underlying principles of why cats behave the way they do.
- Understand how to effectively communicate with cat owners.
- Understand how to assess and resolve specific behavior issues.

In addition, this guide provides two sample case studies of how to implement a community help line for cat behavior issues.

WHY DO WE NEED THIS MANUAL?

At the Humane Society of the United States, we often hear from shelter and rescue staff that they feel they are "winging it" when it comes to advising on cat behavior, and there's a lack of confidence that the information they provide cat owners is accurate and comprehensive. We also hear from sheltering staff and volunteers that although they have a "bag of tricks" to offer cat owners, they don't have a thorough understanding of cat behavior. And then there are all the misconceptions about how to resolve cat behavior issues, which often make matters worse: "Just squirt him with a spray

FOREWORD

bottle” or “Give her a tap on the nose” or “Confine him in a crate until he uses the litter box.” Until now, there’s been a void in the sheltering world of comprehensive materials on cat behavior and cat behavior counseling.

The Humane Society of the United States is committed to addressing pet homelessness at its roots. To keep more cats in their homes, we have created a comprehensive set of cat behavior counseling tools, including this guide. With this knowledge, your organization will be able to adopt “Let’s keep them in their homes” as its new mantra.

A NEW PERSPECTIVE

A cat owner calls your organization and says, “I want to give up my cat. She keeps destroying the furniture with her claws.” What’s your reaction? It’s common for us to become jaded by these calls and assume the worst about the cat owner—that she shouldn’t have gotten a cat to begin with, that she has no connection to her cat, that she’s just passing off her problems on to others. But the truth is likely very different.

It’s important to remember that people most often surrender their pets when they are in crisis; it’s not an easy decision. Here’s a typical situation where a cat owner has reached her wit’s end and calls to ask about surrendering her cat:

Andrea has had Jumpers for six years and he’s always scratched her furniture, but Andrea wasn’t too concerned because the

furniture was old. A year ago, she moved in with her fiancé. Within a few days, Jumpers began scratching the arms of her fiancé’s couch. Her fiancé was upset, so Andrea spoke to a friend who advised her to smack Jumpers with a newspaper when he started to scratch the couch. Her family told her to get rid of Jumpers because he was causing tension with her fiancé. Andrea couldn’t imagine giving Jumpers up, but she didn’t know what to do. Soon, Jumpers had destroyed parts of the couch and Andrea’s fiancé told her that if Jumpers ruined the newly purchased couch, he had to go. Andrea tried to keep Jumpers confined in her room so he wouldn’t scratch the new couch, but he started to cry. After a few weeks she let him out under supervision. But one day she forgot he was out of the bedroom when she left for work, and when she returned home hours later the new couch was badly scratched. Andrea and her fiancé had a huge fight and she felt she had no choice but to give up Jumpers. In the message she left with the local animal shelter, she said, “My cat is ruining my couch and I have to give him up.”

None of us wants to be judged, especially when others don’t know the full story of our lives. And yet, we find ourselves judging people based on a few sentences without knowing anything else about their situation. When cat owners call us, prepared to give up their cats, it’s vital that we listen, remain compassionate and avoid making judgments. As we’ll discuss in this guide, sometimes a new perspective makes all the difference in whether a cat sleeps in his bed or in a shelter cage that night.



Understanding your cat's behavior

In this section we will explore a few big ideas and concepts that serve as the framework for understanding cat behavior.

The first big idea to understand about cats is that they need to feel safe and secure in their home environment.

A cat who feels **safe** perceives the home environment as a territory where she can move freely and engage in her daily routines (eliminating, eating/drinking, playing, resting, sleeping, scratching) without fear of any threat to her well-being.

A cat who feels **secure** perceives the home environment as a territory that is familiar and predictable and which lets her choose where (and in some cases with whom) to engage in her daily routines. Familiarity, predictability and choice enable the cat to feel a sense of control over her environment, which coincides with this sense of security.

Here's what can happen when a cat does not feel safe and secure in her home:

- She might avoid the litter box if she does not feel safe while eliminating in it, either because of its location or type.
- She might hiss, spit and/or growl if approached.
- She might hide.
- She might mark her territory through urinating and/or scratching.

Q: Why are familiarity and predictability so important for cats?

A: By nature, cats are solitary hunters who live in an established territory. Therefore, their relationship to their physical environment is a matter of life and death. If they are not familiar and comfortable in the environment, they can't hunt successfully. If they can't hunt successfully, they die. Also, in the wild, if they find themselves in unfamiliar territory, they could be attacked by other cats or predators.

- She might exhibit compulsive behaviors like over-grooming and overeating as a means of coping with the stress of not feeling safe and secure. Or the stress might cause her to become lethargic and possibly lose her appetite.
- She might show fear-based aggression.

How do we create a sense of safety and security for cats?

- **Maintain predictability and familiarity in the home environment.** This means that the cat can expect to experience the same familiar people, animals, smells, sounds, objects and routines every day. If there are any changes in the home environment, the cat must be exposed to these changes gradually, proceeding at the cat's comfort level.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR CAT'S BEHAVIOR

Examples of vertical space

- Bookcase
 - Shelf
 - Cat tree
 - Milk crate
 - Dresser
 - Desk
 - Chair
 - Table
 - Counter
 - Couch cushion on floor
 - Sturdy cardboard box
- **Provide adequate resources so the cat feels in control of her environment.** For example, throughout the home there should be multiple litter boxes, scratching posts, food/water stations, comfortable hiding spaces and high resting spaces. No matter what the cat needs to do—eliminate, rest, eat, scratch or just observe her surroundings—she should have a choice of where to do it.
 - **Provide adequate territory within the home.** This is particularly important in multi-cat households, but necessary for single cat households as well. When we talk about territory in the home, we need to think vertically. Cats, unlike humans and dogs, inhabit space both horizontally and vertically. Vertical space should go beyond cat trees (which not all cats will use and which are also cost-prohibitive for many cat owners). Creating vertical space requires just a little bit of creativity in using space that already exists and even adding some new vertical space without stretching your budget.

- **Engaging the cat in daily interactive play sessions to decrease stress and increase confidence.** The importance of interactive play is discussed below.

CASE STUDY #1: TAINO AND THE DOG

Taino the cat was temporarily fostered by a man, Matt, who lived in a studio apartment with two other cats and two medium-sized dogs. Taino was first confined in a bathroom for a few weeks and was then given access to the rest of the small apartment. Matt's apartment, in addition to being small, had no furniture other than a mattress on the floor; otherwise, it was empty space. Taino immediately got along with the other cats, and the dogs ignored him. Matt assumed that Taino would adapt well to the home. After a few days, Taino started hissing at one dog in particular any time the dog walked within a few feet of him. Sometimes Taino would run up to the resting dog and swat him a couple of times in the head. When the dog played with one of the other cats, Taino would get in between them. With his hair on end and his tail swishing, he hissed and growled. Matt thought that Taino was being silly and neurotic because Matt knew the dog posed no threat to him. Over the next few days, the behavior intensified, but Matt assumed Taino would eventually adjust.

Then one night Taino attacked the dog seemingly “out of the blue,” launching himself at the dog to bite and scratch him. The dog became aggressive to defend himself, making matters worse. Matt tried to intervene, but every time he managed to pull Taino

Stress is a cat's number one enemy

Because cats are territorial creatures, the stability of their home environment is extremely important to their emotional and physical well-being. Even slight changes in the home can prevent a cat from feeling safe and secure. When cats feel unsafe and insecure, they experience stress, which ultimately leads to the behavior issues described above. Here are examples of what can stress a cat:

- Unfamiliar guests.
- New baby.
- New pet.
- Left alone with cat sitter.
- Vacuum cleaner.
- Construction.
- Vet visit.
- Old age (deteriorating senses).
- New perfume/cologne.
- Outdoor cats.
- New furniture.
- Mice or other animals in walls.
- New work schedule.
- Workers in home.
- Loud noises.
- Illness (feeling vulnerable).
- Smells of other animals brought into home on clothing.
- Person displaying strong, atypical emotions.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR CAT'S BEHAVIOR



off the dog, Taino attacked again. While trying to pull the animals apart, Matt's hands were severely bitten by Taino. The aggression continued for a few minutes, and eventually Matt managed to get Taino into the bathroom. The dog had several puncture wounds, but nothing too serious. Taino had a gash in his stomach requiring three stitches, and Matt wound up in the emergency room and was unable to use his hands for two weeks because of the many deep puncture wounds.

Q: Why did Taino act this way?

A: He didn't feel safe and secure.

Taino considered the dog a threat and, subsequently, felt very unsafe in his new territory. Furthermore, the home lacked high resting spaces and hiding spaces where Taino could feel at least temporarily secure. So Taino acted on his need to feel safe and secure by consistently hissing and swatting at the dog to let him know to keep away. But keeping him away was impossible in the small living space, so Taino continued to feel threatened. He ultimately resorted to attacking the dog. Cats under extreme stress will sometimes decide that "the best defense is a good offense," like Taino did in this case. Here are a few more takeaways from this case:

- **Cats do not act "out of the blue."** There are always signs that a cat is uncomfortable with a situation. However, these signs might be subtle and easily misread. Any time a client says that something happened "out of the blue," be sure ask follow-up questions to identify the precursor or trigger.

■ Cats' and humans' perceptions often differ radically.

Matt perceived that his dog was not a threat to Taino and assumed that everybody would coexist in his quiet, cozy home. From Taino's perspective, he was constantly on guard and wary of the dog. He had nowhere to feel safe and secure in this very constricted space.

CASE STUDY #2: MEOWIE AND THE BABY

Terry describes her cat Meowie as a particularly social cat who loves people. So she was very surprised when Meowie's "entire personality changed," as Terry put it, when she brought her new baby home. She says Meowie hides most of the day, and when she tries to pick her up to see the baby, Meowie hisses at her. Terry says, "She's never hissed before in her life."

Creating a sanctuary or safe room

A new cat who enters the home should be temporarily placed in a sanctuary or safe room where she can slowly adjust to her new territory. This quiet room should have hiding spaces and high resting spaces to help the cat develop a sense of safety and security. A sanctuary room may also be needed temporarily for a resident cat who suddenly feels threatened by changes in her home environment.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR CAT'S BEHAVIOR

Cats perceive the world very differently

Many cat owners do not appreciate the extent to which human and cat perceptions of the world differ. When cat owners understand their cats' very specific needs and perceive the home environment from their cats' points of view, they can begin to make sense of their cats' behavior. This, in turn, increases the cat owner's motivation to resolve the problem because she realizes the behavior is not the cat's fault, nor is it the cat's intention to cause the owner grief.

Here are examples of these differing cat and human perspectives:

Issue	Cat's perspective	Owner's perspective
Litter box scooped every other day.	This is filthy and contrary to my natural needs.	Clean enough.
Closed litter box in closet.	What a nightmare!	Perfect privacy.
Newly adopted cat.	An intruder!	A new friend!
Change in owner's schedule.	What is happening?!	No big deal.
Cat wakes owner at 5:00 a.m.	I'm in a playful mood and I'm hungry.	Can't you see I need to sleep?
Cat pees on owner's bed when owner goes away on vacation.	I'm scared and stressed and meshing my scent with my owner's gives me some comfort.	He's so spiteful.

And keep in mind...

Cats' senses of smell and hearing are so much better than our own that it's beyond our ability to comprehend them. Therefore, the cat may be aware of a new smell or sound that threatens his sense of safety and security in the home, while we might have no idea that the smell or sound even exists. In other words, how we experience our home differs in substantial ways from how our cats experience the same home.

Q: Why is Meowie acting this way?

A: She does not feel safe and secure.

Think about what changed from Meowie's point of view. The familiarity and predictability of her home has been disrupted by new and unfamiliar people, sounds, smells, objects and routines. Meowie's entire world has been turned upside down, and with it her previous sense of safety and security. It's no wonder that she hides in an attempt to make herself feel safe and hisses when she feels a loss of control at being picked up.



The second big idea to understand about cats is that they need to be stimulated in their home environment.

Cats in the wild hunt 10 to 20 times a day, using mental and physical energy to stalk, pounce and eat prey. Cat owners must understand that their indoor cat still needs this mental and physical stimulation. Stimulation is also important because it can lead to a decrease in stress (just as it does with us), as well as an increase in the cat's confidence. In particular, when cats are chasing, pouncing and catching an object, they feel like successful hunters.

And here's what happens when cats are under-stimulated in the home. Many unwanted behaviors can emerge, including:

- Play aggression towards people or other animals.
- Climbing and scratching throughout the home.
- Overactivity at night.
- An increased likelihood of trying to dart outside the home.

On the other end of the spectrum, cats can become bored and depressed when under-stimulated, leading to overeating, lethargy and/or compulsive behaviors.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR CAT'S BEHAVIOR

Moving at the “speed of cat”

Clients are often unaware of just how slowly cats (re)gain a sense of safety and security. It's important to encourage clients to focus more on the progress they're making rather than the final result they want to see, which may take much more time than they initially expect. The client's job is to put into place all the components to help the cat feel safe and secure. The cat will determine the pace at which she begins to feel comfortable in the home.

HOW DO WE MAKE SURE A CAT IS STIMULATED?

Interactive play

The easiest way is to tap into their hunting instinct and give them at least two 15-minute **interactive play** sessions daily. The ideal interactive toy looks like a fishing pole with an object attached to a long piece of string. Some cats like to chase the object in the air as if chasing a bird, while other cats prefer chasing the feather across the floor as if it was a mouse or snake. It's a good idea, particularly with active cats, to schedule meal times after play sessions. This simulates the cat's natural routine of hunt-eat-groom-sleep.

The importance of play for cats cannot be overstated. A lack of play is one of the main sources of behavior issues and engaging the cat in interactive play is often the solution to behavior problems.

Environmental enrichment

There is another component to keeping a cat stimulated, known as environmental enrichment. This entails providing the cat with various stimulating objects to interact with and explore, including:

- Scratching posts.
- Window perches to view the outdoors.
- Tunnels, paper bags and boxes to explore.
- Solo toys that the cat bats around or tries to catch.
- Food foraging options in the home, like treat balls.
- Cat videos (which some cats enjoy watching).
- Catios that allow cats to be outdoors while remaining safe.

CASE STUDY #3: TROMBONE AND JOSÉ

José's cat, Trombone, is two years old. José loves his cat, but he's finding it increasingly difficult to live with him. Every morning at 5:30 Trombone pounces on José's feet and continues to do so even when José yells at him and throws a pillow at him. Trombone just runs away and repeats the behavior. José leaves for work at 9 a.m. When he returns home at 6, his home is usually a “disaster area,” as he puts it, with unraveled toilet paper and knocked-over garbage

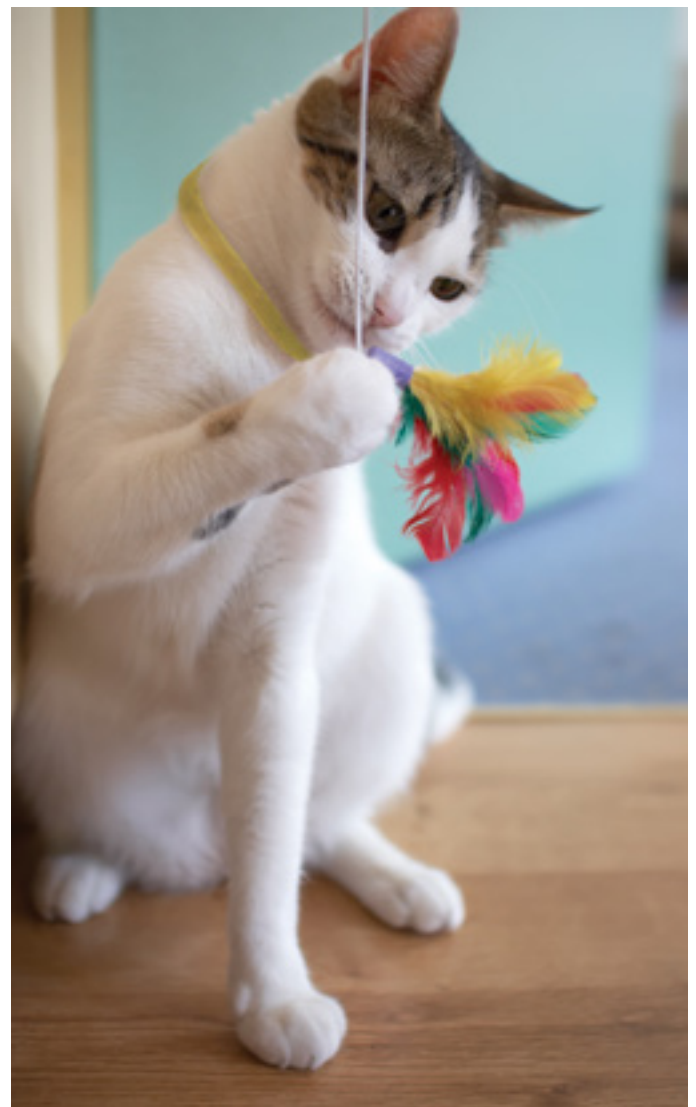
cans. It takes José 15 minutes to clean up his apartment. As soon as he's finished, Trombone starts “attacking” José's legs and then running away when Jose yells at him, only to repeat the behavior again. José is nearing his wit's end, as he puts it.

Q: Why is Trombone acting this way?

A: He's bored and under-stimulated.

Trombone is a young, active cat whose energy needs are not being met. He doesn't have anything else to chase, so he meets some of his energy needs by pouncing on José's feet and then running away.

During the day he attempts to occupy himself by watching things move as he knocks them over or unravels them. But what he really wants is something to “hunt,” and José's feet and legs are what he has to settle for.



UNDERSTANDING YOUR CAT'S BEHAVIOR



The third big idea to understand about cats is that they need to exercise their natural instincts.

The most common natural instincts that can lead to what we perceive as “behavior issues” are:

- **Scratching.** Cats scratch for many reasons: to stretch; to express excitement or alleviate stress; to mark territory (both visually and by scent); to remove the dead nail sheath.
- **Climbing and resting on high surfaces.** Cats feel most safe and secure when resting, observing and sleeping from a high vantage point.
- **Need to expend energy.** As discussed previously, cats have a natural hunting instinct.
- **Eliminating in a clean and safe, secure area.** Because they're releasing scents that can attract unwanted attention from other cats and animals, cats feel vulnerable while eliminating. They don't want a pre-existing scent where they eliminate and they want the location to be in an open area with a good vantage point and multiple potential escape routes.

Follow these steps to resolve many behavior issues:

1. Recognize that the cat is displaying a natural behavior.
2. Redirect the cat to an appropriate surface or object.
3. Deter the cat from the inappropriate surface or object.

SCRATCHING

Scratching is a natural behavior for cats, as natural as breathing. Therefore, the solution is not to stop the cat from scratching, but instead to redirect the cat to an appropriate scratching surface like a scratching post or pad. At the same time, deter the cat from scratching the inappropriate surface.

When a cat scratches, she wants a tall, sturdy object into which she can dig her nails and get in a good stretch. Think of a tree—tall and sturdy. Most of us don't have trees in our homes, but we do have furniture that's tall and sturdy. Usually the furniture is made of a suitable material for nail-digging, from a cat's point of view. That's why the scratching posts you offer must be high-quality, and they must meet the cat's needs. Otherwise, the cat is instinctively going to seek out an object that better meets his needs. The best type of post is at least three feet tall, sturdy (meaning it will not wobble) and made of a rope material called sisal, which cats love to scratch.

Cats also like to scratch in certain locations. Some cats primarily scratch when excited, so they might scratch the walls by the doorway when their people come home. Placing the scratching post by the front door makes the most sense in this case. Cats also scratch to relieve stress—maybe there's a desk by the window that the cat scratches when she gets excited or stressed after watching the comings and goings outdoors. In this case, the scratching post should be placed right by the window. Maybe the cat just loves scratching the couch, so the scratching post should be placed next to the couch.

From the cat's point of view, the wall, the desk and the couch are still excellent scratching surfaces. In addition to providing a replacement scratching post that meets the cat's needs, the cat must be humanely deterred from scratching the wall, desk and couch. This is easily done using something sticky or slick, which cats don't like scratching. For example, double-sided tape or a tight-fitting sheet around the furniture can work.

CLIMBING ON HIGH SURFACES

The same methodology applies for cats who jump on or climb in locations that their owners deem off-limits. If a cat isn't allowed on the counters, the counters have to become a surface that the cat does not want to explore. For example, the owner could cover one side of a piece of cardboard with double-sided tape and place it on the counters when they're not in use. After the cat jumps on this sticky surface just a few times, he'll realize that the counters aren't that tempting. An alternative is to fill cheap aluminum baking trays with an inch of water and place them on the counters when not in use. Cats don't like jumping in water, and very soon the cat will consider the counters a “no-go” zone.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR CAT'S BEHAVIOR

At the same time, the owner must offer suitable areas for the cat to climb, ideally somewhere close to the counters. The owner could place a perch on the kitchen window, let the cat access the top of the refrigerator or make a shelf or desk just outside the kitchen cat-friendly by placing a blanket and some treats on it.

CONCLUSION

Understanding cats' needs is the basis of effective cat behavior counseling. The underlying source of most behavior issues is one or more of the following:

- The cat is responding to not feeling safe and secure in the home environment. Note: This could also include illness or injury.
- The cat is responding to a lack of adequate stimulation in the home environment.
- The cat is exhibiting a natural behavior that should be redirected to an appropriate object.

Cats are not enigmas. They behave in a rational manner in relation to their environment.

Cats are also extremely adept at communicating their emotional

state. Understanding how they communicate is the topic of the next section.

Cats don't misbehave

It's important for cat owners to understand that cats (and dogs!) don't think in terms of right and wrong like we do. They think in terms of fulfilling their needs. For example, a cat doesn't scratch a scratching post because it's the right thing to do. He scratches it because he feels it's the best place to scratch in the home. Similarly, a cat doesn't use the litter box because it's the right thing to do. If she's using the litter box, it's because it contains the substrate that best meets her needs and she feels safe when eliminating in this box. And if these same cats start to scratch or eliminate elsewhere in the home, they are not in any way understanding that their actions are wrong. They are simply responding to their environment and choosing somewhere else to scratch or eliminate that best meets their needs. So what we perceive as "misbehavior" is, in fact, a cat's rational response to his environment.





Cats are masters of communication

Pam Johnson-Bennett is perhaps the most well-regarded cat behavior expert in the world and the author of many helpful books about cat behavior. She coined a phrase that is particularly apt when discussing cats: They are “masters of communication.” Specifically, cats communicate through:

Scent. Pheromones are chemical scents released through facial rubbing, scratching (the pads of cats’ feet contain scent glands) and urinating. Facial pheromones are “friendly” scents, so cats rub their cheeks against other cats, people and objects when they are feeling relaxed. By contrast, the releasing of pheromones in urine (urine marking) is an indication of stress, caused by other cats or another stressor in the environment.

Body language. Cats communicate with their eyes, ears, whiskers, tail, hair and posture.

Vocalizations. Cats make an impressive number of sounds to communicate, including friendly/welcoming sounds, which include purring,

Because cat behavior counseling is typically done over the phone and the counselor can’t observe the cat’s behavior herself, it’s particularly important to ask the client questions about his cat’s body language and vocalizations to assess the cat’s behavior and mindset.



Friendly greeting

Head high
Tail high—not bristled



Aggressive

Tail hangs
straight down



Defensive

Tail curved down
and bristled



Fearful

Tail raised and bristled

CATS ARE MASTERS OF COMMUNICATION

chirping, meowing and trilling; and sounds meant to create distance, which include hissing, spitting and growling.

CASE STUDY: CAT “ATTACKS”

A cat owner states that every evening her cat “attacks” her legs about 10 minutes after she arrives home from work. The cat grabs her leg as she walks by and holds on until she shakes him off. Sometimes the cat bites her leg, but not hard enough to cause pain or break skin. When we ask the client questions about the cat’s body language, she says that when she returns home from work her cat greets her with his tail and head held up high. He lets out a few chirps and he rubs his head and body against her legs.

Given this description, it seems that the cat is not actually attacking his owner. Based on the cat’s body language, he is happy and excited to see his owner when she returns home. His behavior is most likely play aggression because he’s under-stimulated after having nothing to do all day. The solution is to engage the cat in interactive play soon after the owner returns home from work.

CASE STUDY: PETTING-INDUCED AGGRESSION

There is a common behavior in cats known as petting-induced aggression. While being pet, the cat becomes overstimulated or uncomfortable with where she’s being pet, how she’s being pet or the length of the petting. Seemingly out of the blue she bites or scratches the person petting her. But this behavior almost never happens without warning. The cat’s body language prior to this bite or scratch most likely indicated that she was no longer comfortable with the situation. The body language might have been subtle, but it was there. It could have been the swishing of her tail, the dilation of her eyes, a movement of the ears or whiskers, the bristling of her hair, a sudden vocalization or a glance back at the person. These subtle clues were the cat’s way of trying to indicate his discomfort before taking action.

This behavior issue is readily resolvable once the cat owner learns how to read his cat’s body language and to stop petting before the cat shows any signs of agitation. The cat owner should pay attention to where the cat is most comfortable being pet (typically on the head, chin and maybe the back), and limiting petting to these areas of his body. And, finally, the cat owner should figure out how the cat likes to be pet. Is it long slow strokes, shorter scratches or something in between? With this new knowledge of feline body language, the cat’s behavior is no longer an upsetting mystery. The owner might even have a greater appreciation for his cat and her great communication skills.

CONCLUSION

We’re now well on our way to appreciating that cats make sense.

Cat communication through body language

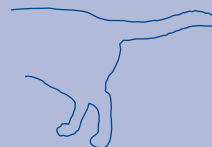
A happy cat:



Friendly and content



Very happy to see you



Amicable, not fearful or aggressive



Alert, interested

A worried cat:



Friendly, but unsure



Non-threatening, unsure



Submissive

An angry or unhappy cat:



Angry



Potentially aggressive



Excited, angry or irritable



Aggressive (defensive)

Their behaviors are typically easily understood once we understand their needs, and their effectiveness as communicators provides us with lots of clues about how they are feeling. Now we’re ready to explore how we can most effectively communicate with cat owners to help keep cats in their homes.

The six keys to effectively communicating with cat owners

How we communicate with cat owners is just as important as what we know about cat behavior.

There are six keys to cat behavior counseling:

1. **Use non-judgmental and empathic communication with clients.** It is essential to develop a good relationship with the client so that the client views you as an ally and a source of support. If we are perceived positively, the client is likely to engage us in a lengthy conversation so we can properly assess the causes of the behavior issue, and the client is also likely to follow the advice we offer. Keep in mind that most people seek help when they are stressed and they may speak negatively about their cats because of this stress, but this does not mean they don't love and care for their cats.

Place an equal emphasis on knowledge about cats and knowledge of how to most effectively communicate with clients.

2. **Do not assume the client's description of his cat's behavior is accurate.** As cat behavior counselors we do not want to make premature assumptions, including that the client's description of his cat's behavior is accurate. For example, cat owners often misread their cats' behavior and label defensive behaviors such as hissing, growling or swatting as "attacking." Also, cat owners often mistakenly attribute human emotions and motivations (e.g., spite, anger,

jealousy) to their cats and it's important to not reinforce this type of language when speaking with the client.

If a question can be asked, then an assumption should never be made.

3. **Ask the right questions to properly assess the situation.** Success with cat behavior counseling is contingent on getting as much accurate information as possible by asking comprehensive questions. Think of yourself as a detective and asking questions is your sole investigative tool. While asking questions seems simple and straightforward, it can be the most challenging aspect of cat behavior counseling and requires practice.

Asking insightful and thorough questions enables a comprehensive investigation into the potential causes of the cat's behavior.

4. **Provide sound advice based on an understanding of cats' needs.** Successful cat behavior counseling entails a comprehensive and sophisticated understanding of cats' fundamental needs, assessing which of these needs are not being met, and determining how to provide for these needs. Cat behavior counseling is not about having a "bag of tricks" and randomly offering suggestions.

Understand the cat's needs and how to ensure that the home environment meets these needs.

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- 5. Be practical and respectful of clients' financial and time limitations.** As previously noted, there is an important interpersonal component to cat behavior counseling and the advice provided must take into account information not only about the cat, but also the cat's owner. Of course, we always need to provide the best advice that will address the behavior issue, but we may need to tailor our suggestions and protocols to what we think the client can do and what they can afford.

Practical financial and time considerations must be taken into account when offering advice.

- 6. Follow up with clients.** Following up with clients is essential! And if you have a positive first conversation, it opens the door to further conversations. There are three reasons follow-up is so important:
- The client may not have implemented some or all of the advice provided and she may need a reminder and/or encouragement to do so.
 - The client may have implemented everything that was advised, and yet there's been no subsequent progress in resolving the behavior issue.
 - The client may need ongoing support if the problem is resolving, but not as quickly as was hoped.

Our assistance should not be viewed as a one-time conversation, but rather a series of conversations in which the cat owner is provided with ongoing support and advice.

To explore these six ideas, we'll review a case study involving a cat owner named Cynthia and her cat, Pickles. Here's the message that Cynthia left on a cat behavior help line.

"Somebody please tell me where I can take my cat. The cat keeps peeing in my kitchen sink. I was about to boil water for tea this morning and my sink is full of pee. He's being spiteful. I love this cat, but he's nothing but trouble recently. Call me back and tell me where I can bring him."

KEY #1 TO CAT BEHAVIOR COUNSELING: USE NON-JUDGMENTAL AND EMPATHIC COMMUNICATION

In cases like this one, the first step is to defuse the situation. By helping Cynthia calm down and get out of crisis mode, we can help her resolve Pickles' behavior issue. If Cynthia remains agitated and stressed, she's not likely to have the patience for a lengthy conversation, nor will she see the point of it because she wants to give up the cat. Our goal is to move Cynthia from crisis mode to a state where she's ready to have a productive conversation.

Why lending hope is so important

Cat owners typically reach out to shelters and rescues when they are at their wit's end. The behavior issue has often been happening for months, and the cat owner has already spoken to family, friends and neighbors. They've often received faulty or insufficient advice or have been told to just "get rid of the cat." At this point, the cat owner might be feeling demoralized. We need to counter this sense of hopelessness by sharing optimism that the situation can be resolved. When lending hope, it's important to remind the cat owner that she loves her cat and has taken great care of him. For example, you might say, "It's wonderful that you've had him for seven years and given him such a great home. Clearly you must love him a lot. It would be such a shame to give him up. Let's work together to try to resolve this problem. Okay?"

Empathize

Empathy is a key tool for helping a person get out of crisis mode. Here is what you could say to Cynthia when you call her back: "I understand how frustrating that must be to have urine in your sink. No one wants to wake up to that. The good news is that usually litter box issues are resolvable and sometimes the solution is actually fairly simple. I realize you are very upset with Pickles, but it sounds like you also really love him and I'd like to help you try to resolve the problem so you can keep him. Does that sound okay?"

Note that in our response to Cynthia's message, we are validating her emotions by empathizing with her frustration. Being non-judgmental means that you are doing your best to empathize with the client's situation so that you can work with her to fix it. If we as cat behavior counselors are not perceived as a source of support, the client won't take our advice and the cat will suffer.

Note too that in our response to Cynthia, we offer hope that the problem can be resolved. This is also key in transitioning the client out of crisis mode. When the client understands that there is most likely a solution to the problem, they will often agree to a discussion with the goal of keeping the cat.

Be an ally

Imagine what would happen if we returned Cynthia's call and said, "You have no right being a cat owner if you're going to get so angry at your cat!" What would Cynthia's response be? She would almost certainly become defensive and either hang up or ignore our advice. She's already stressed and wants to remove the cat; an antagonistic response is not going to make her reconsider her

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Keep in mind that:

- People usually call for help when they are in crisis and are angry and frustrated. It's our job to defuse some of their tension and help them see that there is likely a positive resolution to the crisis.
- Almost all of us have at times become frustrated with our pets and can empathize with cat owners who are frustrated with their cats' behavior.
- The client may have other very stressful or upsetting things going on in her life and this issue with the cat may have tipped her emotions so that she feels like she can't handle the cat anymore.
- This person is calling for help of some sort. At the very least, she wants to find out where the animal shelter is. So you know that she has at least some concern for her cat and she doesn't want the cat to be harmed.

options. And of course, it's the cat who will ultimately suffer from this unproductive conversation. A non-judgmental approach is absolutely essential when speaking with clients. This is not to say that you can't feel frustrated at what a client is saying or doing to her cat, but for the sake of a positive conversation and for the sake of the cat, it's essential that the client view you as an ally who is trying to help her resolve the problem, not as a judgmental adversary.

Engaging in non-judgmental and empathic communication with the client is the basis of successful cat behavior counseling. When we empathize with people and talk to them in a non-judgmental, compassionate manner, it sometimes almost miraculously transforms what seems to be a hopeless situation to one where the owner enthusiastically accepts the assistance you offer.

KEY #2 TO CAT BEHAVIOR COUNSELING: DO NOT ASSUME THE CLIENT'S ASSESSMENT OF HIS CAT'S BEHAVIOR IS CORRECT

Cat owners often mistakenly attribute human emotions and motivations to their cats. It's important not to reinforce this type of language. For example, clients might say that their cats are being angry, mean, jealous, or—in Cynthia's case—spiteful. At this point, we don't know what's going on with Cynthia's cat, Pickles, but one thing we do know is that he is not being spiteful.

Because of these misperceptions, we shouldn't assume that a client's assessment of his cat's behavior is correct. And we shouldn't reinforce the potentially flawed assessment by using the same language as the client. For example, if the cat owner says, "My cat keeps attacking me when I walk by him in the morning," use neutral language, such as, "Can you describe what the cat is actually doing when he shows this behavior?"

When responding to Cynthia's claim that Pickles is being "spiteful" by eliminating in the sink, we can say, "I understand that it may seem like he's being spiteful, but fortunately cats don't think like we do. He's not trying to upset you or show annoyance by this behavior. He's experiencing a problem, which is leading him to pee in your sink. We have to figure out what the source of the problem is."

KEY #3 TO CAT BEHAVIOR COUNSELING: ASK LOTS OF QUESTIONS TO ASSESS THE SITUATION PROPERLY

To provide effective cat behavior counseling, you need as much accurate information as possible about the situation. To get this information, you must ask comprehensive questions. Think of yourself as a detective with questions as your sole investigative tool. When Cynthia says, "My cat is peeing in the sink," we don't want to offer her random suggestions to try to resolve the problem. Instead we want to **commence a thorough investigation**

Observed behavior	Owner's assessment	The reality
Cat pees on owner's clothing.	Cat is being spiteful.	Cat is likely stressed and/or ill; and/or there's a problem with the litter box setup. (Cats avoiding the litter box often choose soft items as substrates to eliminate on. Stressed cats may also seek to mesh their scents with their owners' which helps them feel more secure.)
Cat hisses at the new baby.	Cat is jealous.	Cat is fearful.
Cat hisses and swats when approached by people.	Cat is attacking. Cat is mean.	Cat wants to be left alone.
Cat pounces on people at various times throughout the day but is otherwise friendly and social.	Cat "suddenly attacks".	Cat is likely under-stimulated and bored and just needs playtime.

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into Pickles' behavior and home environment to understand why he is eliminating in the kitchen sink.

Let's use the case of Pickles and Cynthia to examine the depth of questions you must ask when consulting with a client.

True or false?

When Cynthia says Pickles "keeps peeing in the sink," she probably means it's happening every day or at least every other day.

False. We have no idea how often Pickles is peeing in the sink until we ask more questions.

Let's begin.

After identifying the basic information about the cat (name, age, reproductive status, length of time in the home), **the first set of questions we ask should focus on the behavior itself so that we understand exactly what the cat is doing.**

This is the foundation of all the other questions we will ask.

Pickles: Six-year-old neutered male who has been in Cynthia's home since he was a year old.

Questions to understand the behavior itself (Cynthia's response in red):

Q: Where and how often is Pickles eliminating outside the box?

A: In the kitchen sink a few times a week.

Q: Are there other areas of the home where he is also eliminating?

A: No.

Q: How often is he using the litter box?

A: All of the time, except for these incidents. He always defecates in the box.

Q: Does there seem to be a pattern as to when this behavior occurs? Time of day? When home alone?

A: Always late at night.

Q: How long has this problem existed?

A: Two to three months. He always used the litter box previously.

Now we have something to work with. If we didn't ask these initial questions, we would be approaching this case with no basis on which to begin to understand why Pickles is eliminating in the sink.

Understanding why a cat avoids the litter box can be challenging because there are several factors to consider. To this end, we have a very useful framework for assessing and advising on cases pertaining to a cat's avoidance of the litter box:

The four reasons cats avoid the litter box

When a cat avoids the litter box, it's a result of one or more of the following four reasons:

1. A medical issue.
2. A problem with the litter box setup.
3. Something or someone inside or outside the home environment is causing the cat stress.
4. A result of tensions among cats.

Note that these reasons are not exclusive; more than one of these reasons may apply to a single case.

Next, let's ask Cynthia questions about a possible **medical issue** as the source of Pickles' sporadic avoidance of the litter box.

Q: Has Pickles been to the vet recently?

A: No.

Q: Does he seem to be acting normally aside from this inappropriate elimination?

A: Yes. He is eating and drinking well; his activity level is good. His behavior has not changed during the last few months. There are no signs of blood in the urine and no signs of straining or discomfort eliminating.



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Preliminary assessment: At this point we can't rule out a medical cause for the behavior because Pickles has not been to the vet, but from this initial information it doesn't seem that this is the prime suspect.

Now we'll ask Cynthia questions about a **possible problem with the litter box setup**.

Q: How many litter boxes do you have?

A: One box.

Q: Is the box covered or open?

A: Covered box.

Q: Where is it located?

A: It's in the bathroom.

Q: What type of litter do you use?

A: It varies; whatever is on sale.

Q: How often do you scoop and clean the box?

A: A few times a week.

Preliminary assessment: There are some red flags here! The litter box setup might not meet Pickles' needs, and it could be the source of the behavior issue. (A proper litter box setup is discussed below. The box should be large and open and it should be located in an open, accessible area of the home that has multiple escape routes. The litter should be unscented and scoopable. The box should be scooped twice a day and cleaned every 10–14 days.)

Next, we'll ask Cynthia questions about **possible environmental stressors** that could be the source of Pickles' sporadic avoidance of the litter box.

Q: When the problem began, were there any changes in the home environment, big or small, that may have caused the cat stress?

A: Cynthia got a second cat, an 8 month-old spayed cat, two months ago. Cynthia could not identify any other obvious sources of stress for Pickles; the home environment has seemingly remained stable and unchanged in the last few months except for the addition of the new cat.

Q: What's the home environment like?

A: It's a one-bedroom apartment on the first floor. It's a quiet household, just Cynthia and her partner and the two cats.

Q: How does Pickles interact with others in the home?

A: He's a social cat who enjoys being pet. He is always friendly and curious when guests visit. He gets a lot of petting, but is rarely played with. Cynthia will sometimes toss a toy for him to chase.



Q: How does Pickles interact with the home environment?

A: He rarely hides. He enjoys resting on the top of the couch and on the kitchen table. Sometimes he will sit on the window-sill looking outside.

Q: Is there anything else in the home or outside of it that might cause him stress?

A: He watches outdoor cats. There are a fair number of them. He never appears agitated though, just curious.

Preliminary assessment: The new cat and/or outdoor cats could be a potential stressor.

Finally, we'll ask Cynthia about **possible tensions among the cats** that could be the source of Pickles' sporadic avoidance of the litter box.

Q: How do you know which cat is peeing in the sink?

A: Pickles likes jumping up on the counters and the sink and the other cat doesn't do this.

Q: How do the cats interact with each other?

A: They like each other. They play together, groom each other and sleep together.

Q: Does one cat seem to bully or intimidate the other?

A: No. If anything, Pickles plays rough with the other cat.

Preliminary assessment: It seems that the new cat is not directly the source of the behavior issue, but the additional cat's presence may be indirectly related to the problem.

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Based on our questions and the information we gathered, what conclusions can we draw at this point about the most likely reasons that Pickles urinates in the sink a few times a week during the night?

Here's an initial hypothesis. First, of the four reasons cats avoid the litter box, we can rule out inter-cat tension: This doesn't appear to be a factor in Pickles' case. We can't entirely rule out a medical cause because Pickles hasn't been to the vet recently, but it seems unlikely that any potential issue would affect him only at night. If Pickles had a medical issue, we'd expect him to avoid the box at various times of the day. So we're not ruling out a medical issue, but for reasons we'll discuss, we might not advise an immediate vet visit.

By eliminating those factors, we're left with the litter box setup and a possible environmental stressor as potential causes of this behavior issue.

The litter box setup is not good. It's a closed box with inconsistent brands of litter. Given their costs, the litter brands might be of poor quality. And because there's now a second cat using the box, the box is even dirtier. There is also a possible environmental stressor involving the outdoor cats, who would be more prevalent and obvious to Pickles at night when they are roaming. An initial hypothesis based on the preliminary information we have gathered would be that Pickles is uncomfortable using a covered, dirty box at night with the other cats in the neighborhood right outside his window. The kitchen sink offers a high vantage point, which might make him feel safe and secure when he eliminates.

We can arrive at this assessment only by asking many questions. This systematic approach to asking questions has allowed us to acquire and organize lots of useful information.



KEY #4 TO CAT BEHAVIOR COUNSELING: PROVIDE ADVICE BASED ON A THOROUGH UNDERSTANDING OF CATS' NEEDS

As discussed in Section 1, a behavior issue typically indicates that one of the cat's needs is not being met. For example:

- The need to feel safe and secure in the home.
- The need to be stimulated.
- The need to exercise a natural instinct.

With this in mind, it's easy to see why understanding cats' needs is so crucial to assessing behavior issues.

In the case of Pickles, we've identified some unmet needs that may be leading him to urinate at night in the kitchen sink. We identified that his litter box setup does not meet his need for an open space with a consistent sand-like litter that is kept clean. The closed box might not meet his need for security, particularly at night when outdoor cats are roaming outside his home. And it seems, in general, that Pickles' need for stimulation is not being met because he receives no interactive play.

If we can support Cynthia in meeting Pickles' needs, this behavior issue will likely be resolved.

KEY #5 TO CAT BEHAVIOR COUNSELING: TAKE INTO ACCOUNT PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING THE CLIENT'S TIME AND FINANCES WHEN PROVIDING ADVICE

As discussed in the first key to cat behavior counseling, it's essential to empathize with the client. Identifying with the client's situation is important because it helps guide us in the advice we offer. A client we've supported and treated with compassion is much more likely to reveal that money and/or time is an issue than a client who distrusts us because we used a judgmental tone. And this is important information because a major component of successful cat behavior counseling is being practical with our advice. Of course, we always need to provide the best advice for the issue, but we might need to tailor our suggestions and protocols to what we think the client can do and what they can afford.

This brings us back to the idea of the client being in crisis. People who call while in crisis are currently feeling overwhelmed. The worst thing we could do is overwhelm the client with advice that may not be feasible. Each situation is unique, and a non-judgmental approach will help you to better navigate how you can best help a specific client.

Let's examine this concept of being practical through the lens of Cynthia's and Pickles' situation.

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In the course of our conversation with Cynthia, she revealed that money is an issue and she does not have very much expendable income. We'll take this information into account when giving Cynthia advice. Below is the advice provided to Cynthia based on our assessment of why Pickles is avoiding the litter box. **Green** indicates the advice that Cynthia should implement immediately. These steps should be feasible despite her financial limitations. **Red** indicates advice we can offer to Cynthia if the behavior issue continues even after she follows our first set of recommendations.

Scoop the box twice a day.

Remove the cover from the box.

Add a second open box in or as close to the kitchen as possible.

Purchase an unscented, scoopable litter.

Engage Pickles in interactive play two times a day to help him cope with any stress he might be feeling.

Cover windows at night so he does not see the outdoor cats.

Clean the urine with an enzymatic urine cleaner.

Put a stopper in the kitchen sink and fill it with two inches of water at night to deter Pickles from standing in the sink to eliminate.

Visit the veterinarian.

Provide or create more vertical space.

Let's focus on the two pieces of advice in red.

Ideally, there would be more vertical space in the home (in addition to the top of the couch and the kitchen table), as an increase in high resting spaces could help Pickles feel a greater sense of safety and security in the home. However, Pickles already has some places he can rest up high and we're already giving Cynthia a lot to do. So this one piece of advice—which is probably not essential to solving the issue—can wait until it's necessary.

Our decision not to advise a vet visit immediately gets at the heart of why it's important to be practical.

It's established protocol among cat behaviorists that any time a cat is avoiding the litter box, the first step is to take the cat to the vet. And if Cynthia had told us that money is not an issue, we would certainly suggest a vet visit. We would also suggest a vet visit regardless of Cynthia's income if we suspected that Pickles had a medical issue that required immediate treatment. For example, if Cynthia said that Pickles was having trouble urinating, was routinely avoiding the litter box, had blood in his urine or cried while eliminating, we'd immediately recommend a vet visit.



But that's not the case with Pickles. Therefore, there are other practical matters to consider. First, we have to remember that Cynthia is very close to surrendering Pickles. She's also overwhelmed by the behavior issue. Finally, money is a concern. Given all of this, and the fact that Pickles does not appear in distress, it does not seem prudent to advise Cynthia to spend money she doesn't have for a medical problem that may not exist.

Rationale for not referring Pickles to the vet immediately:

- Cynthia is on a tight budget.
- Based on the information we collected, there is a good chance that the cause of the behavior is not medically related.
- Although we're not vets, Pickles' health does not appear to be in danger and there is time to see if environmental changes resolve the behavior issue.
- If the behavior issue continues despite the implementation of our advice, then a vet visit is necessary.

KEY #6 TO CAT BEHAVIOR COUNSELING: FOLLOW UP WITH THE CLIENT IN A TIMELY MANNER

Following up with clients is essential! If you have a positive first conversation, you've opened the door to further conversations. It's important to keep in mind that the conversation you have with a client may be the first of many conversations, and sometimes it takes people time to think things through. If you are non-judgmental, the client is going to be much more likely to consider what you are saying.

As the phone call with Cynthia ended, we informed her that we would follow up with her in seven to 10 days, and in the meantime she was welcome to contact us if needed.

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The follow-up calls are as necessary as the initial call for the following three reasons:

1. Cynthia may not have implemented some or all of the advice provided, and she might need a reminder and/or encouragement to do so. It's common for clients not to implement all the advice initially offered. The moment of crisis with the cat passes, and other things in life tend to get in the way. A follow-up call can motivate clients to implement the advice because they realize they really do have our support. On the follow-up call, we might also discover that there is some barrier to implementing the advice. For example, maybe Cynthia's partner refuses to allow a litter box in or near the kitchen, or maybe Cynthia doesn't have the money to purchase any litter that's not on sale.
2. Cynthia may have implemented everything that was advised, and yet there's been no progress in resolving the behavior issue. Pickles is still peeing in the kitchen sink a few times a week. Or maybe because of the water in the sink, he's now peeing on the counter. At this point, we need to reassess the situation. Let's say that Cynthia has purchased a second open litter box, switched to unscented scoopable litter and started scooping the boxes twice a day, but Pickles is still eliminating in the sink. Now we can guess that Pickles' issue might not be related to the litter box setup. At this point, a vet visit is a priority. We need to diagnose or rule out a medical issue.

3. Cynthia might need ongoing support if the problem is improving very slowly. Some cat behavior issues (like long-standing elimination outside of the box) can take weeks or months to fully resolve. Cynthia needs to know that we're here to provide ongoing assistance and emotional support.

We should be confident that the case of Cynthia and Pickles will have a successful outcome. Cynthia clearly loves Pickles, and now that she understands him and his needs, she is motivated to implement our advice. Since we had a great first conversation with Cynthia, she realizes that we're here to support her and to ensure that Pickles remains in the loving home that she provides. We should look forward to calling her in a week to get an update and, if needed, to continue to work with her to resolve Pickles' avoidance of the litter box.

CONCLUSION

Congratulations! We now not only have an excellent understanding of the principles underlying cat behavior, but we also know how to communicate effectively with cat owners so we can assess the behavior issue and ensure that our advice is implemented. We are now ready to turn our attention to assessing and resolving specific cat behavior issues.



Assessing and advising on common cat behavior issues

The following informational charts are designed to help you do two things:

1. Accurately assess the most common behavior issues.
2. Provide appropriate advice.

I. AVOIDING THE LITTER BOX

There are four possible reasons that a cat avoids the litter box:

1. A medical issue.
2. A problem with the litter box setup.
3. An environmental stressor(s).
4. Tensions among cats.

When working with a client whose cat is avoiding the litter box, this framework can guide both the questions you ask the client and the advice you recommend. The charts below will help you to problem-solve with clients. Note that there can be multiple causes for a litter box issue. For example, a cat may have a medical issue in addition to avoiding the box because of its location or its dirtiness.

In all cases, advise the client to spay/neuter the cat. This will help address a variety of issues that may be causing the cat to avoid the litter box. And always advise the client to clean the urine with an enzymatic urine cleaner, which is sold at pet stores and online.

Common cat behavior issues:

- Avoiding the litter box.
- Scratching inappropriate objects.
- Climbing/Resting on inappropriate objects.
- Play aggression.
- Petting-Induced aggression.
- Fear-based aggression.
- Not getting along with other cats.



ASSESSING AND ADVISING

The cat avoids the litter box because of...a medical issue	
What are medical issues that could lead a cat to avoid the litter box?	Urinary problems, including: ■ Diabetes. ■ Hyperthyroidism. ■ Crystals. ■ Renal failure. ■ Kidney stones. ■ Cystitis. ■ Urinary tract infection. Fecal problems, including: ■ Irritable bowels. ■ Impacted anal glands. ■ Constipation. ■ Megacolon.
Why might a cat avoid the litter box because of a medical issue?	The cat might: ■ Associate the pain/discomfort of elimination with the litter box and avoid it. ■ Have to eliminate often and immediately but can't get to the box quickly enough. ■ Not want to eliminate because of discomfort or pain, so she avoids elimination until she can no longer do so and then eliminates wherever she happens to be. ■ Eliminate as soon as he feels discomfort.
What are indications that a cat may have a medical issue?	The cat might: ■ Strain to eliminate. ■ Have blood or discoloration in urine/feces. ■ Have hard or soft stools. ■ Vocalize while eliminating. ■ Make frequent visits to the litter box. ■ Avoid the litter box.
What advice should I give the client?	Take your cat to the veterinarian. Tests like urinalysis, a fecal exam, bloodwork and/or X-rays can help diagnose the problem.

The cat avoids the litter box because of...a problem with the litter box setup	
What are problems with the litter box setup that could lead a cat to avoid the litter box?	A cat might dislike the litter box setup because: ■ It's dirty. ■ It's covered. ■ It's in a bad location. ■ There aren't enough boxes. ■ The litter type is undesirable. ■ It's too small. ■ The sides are too high. ■ It has litter box liners. ■ It's too close to food/water.
Why might the cat avoid the litter box because of a poor setup?	Cats need to: ■ Have minimal scent associated with the litter box. ■ Feel safe and secure when eliminating. ■ Feel physically comfortable in the box.
What are indications that a cat has a problem with the litter box setup?	A cat might: ■ Eliminate right near the box. ■ Quickly jump out of the box after elimination. ■ Stand on the sides of the box to eliminate. ■ Avoid the litter box.

The cat avoids the litter box because of...a problem with the litter box setup (cont.)	
What advice should I give the client?	Create a litter box setup your cat will love! Here are some things to consider: Type of box. Offer a large open box (at least 1.5 times the size of the cat) with sides that the cat can easily climb. Location of box(es). The box(es) should: ■ Be in a quiet area where the cat is not likely to be startled, but also in a location that is easy for the cat to access and not out of the way. ■ Be in a location where the cat can see the space all around him. It should allow for multiple avenues of escape. It should not be in a closet, in a tight corner or under a sink. ■ Not be near any appliances that suddenly turn on and off. ■ Not be near food/water. ■ Be dispersed throughout the house, with one box on each floor. Number of boxes. Make sure to have at least as many boxes as there are cats. Type of litter. Cats prefer unscented, fine-grained, clumping/scoopable litter because it's the most like sand. Cleaning protocol. Scoop the box twice a day and thoroughly clean the box every 10–14 days.

Cats prefer a large open litter box that is located in an open area of the home. They also prefer unscented, scoopable litter. Why?

- Cats are desert animals, and the desert is like a giant open litter box. The sand has no scent and is fine-grained—just like unscented, scoopable litter. That's why it's the best substrate for cats.
- When cats eliminate, they release scents that might attract other cats and animals to their location. They are therefore placing themselves in a vulnerable position, so they need to be able to see their surroundings. They also want escape routes in various directions—just in case another animal approaches. That's why a closed box, or even an open box that is in an inaccessible or closed-off area, doesn't feel right to a cat.
- Cats bury their waste to avoid attracting other animals to their location. In the desert, they have the option of eliminating in varied locations, not just one. That's why a single box or a dirty box represents a problem for the cat: It goes against her basic survival instinct.
- It's also worth noting that a cat's sense of smell is several dozen times better than our own. If a dirty box smells unpleasant to us, imagine what it must be like for a cat to enter a dirty box!



ASSESSING AND ADVISING

The cat avoids the litter box because of...something that is causing the cat stress	
What are sources of stress that could lead a cat to avoid the litter box?	Environmental stressors might include: ■ A new baby. ■ Outdoor cats. ■ New routines. ■ New people/animals. ■ New smells. ■ Loss of family member (human or animal). ■ New sounds (e.g., construction). ■ New objects in the home (e.g., furniture). ■ Being let outdoors.
Why might stress lead to an avoidance of the litter box?	The cat might eliminate in a different part of the home to restore her scent if she does not feel safe and secure. In some cases, the cat will seek to use her scent to mask an unfamiliar scent. In other cases, a cat might eliminate on materials that contain the smell of her owner (e.g., clothing, bedding) because meshing her scent with her person's scents comforts her.
What are indications that a cat may be experiencing stress leading to an avoidance of the litter box?	Cats might eliminate: ■ Near windows or doors leading to the outside if the stressor is coming from outdoors (e.g., outdoor cats). ■ On their person's bedding or clothing. ■ In other areas of the home where they experience stress. ■ In areas other than the litter box if the litter box area is where they experience the stress.
What advice should I give the client?	■ Keep the cat indoors. ■ If the source of the stress can be identified and removed, then remove it. For example, if the issue is an outdoor cat, use blinds to deter the cat from seeing the outdoor cat. If loud guests scare the cat, confine the cat in a comfortable room when guests arrive. ■ If the source of the stress can be identified but cannot be removed (e.g., a baby), help the cat gradually feel comfortable with the stressor by engaging the cat in play and providing highly valued treats or food near the source of stress. This will help change the cat's association of the person/thing from negative to positive. Take the process slowly if the cat seems uncomfortable. ■ Make sure the cat has lots of interactive play and environmental enrichment, which will help reduce her stress. ■ Provide the cat with safe hiding spaces, high resting spaces and a safe room.

The cat avoids the litter box because of...tensions among cats in the home	
Why would tensions among cats lead to avoidance of the litter box?	Cats are territorial animals. Problems arise if they feel in competition with each other for resources or don't feel they have adequate space. Cats also have hierarchies and this can lead to bullying and jockeying for position. Therefore: ■ One cat might intimidate another cat from using the litter box. For example, a bully cat might physically block the pathway to the box or pounce on the bullied cat when she uses it, which leads the bullied cat to find some other location to eliminate. ■ Cats who are competing for territory in the home might spray throughout the home.

The cat avoids the litter box because of...tensions among cats in the home (cont.)	
What are indications that tensions among cats may be leading to an avoidance of the litter box?	The bully cat(s) might: ■ Spray on various objects in the home. ■ Sit or lay in areas of the home that block access to the litter box. ■ Stare (often subtly) at the bullied cat (the bully cat is often the silent one, while the cat who vocalizes and swats is the one being bullied). The bullied cat(s) might: ■ Spray on various objects in the home. ■ Eliminate in open, more accessible areas of the home where they are less likely to be surprised and pounced on by the bully cat (living and dining rooms are often open areas where a bullied cat will eliminate).
What advice should I give the client?	■ Make sure all cats in the home are spayed/neutered. ■ Make sure that you have at least as many litter boxes as cats, plus one more. Make sure they are all large, open boxes. Place the boxes in different areas of the home where the cat has multiple avenues of escape and can see all around the area when eliminating. ■ Have lots of high resting spaces in the home to increase the amount of territory so the cats do not feel in competition with each other for space. ■ Have more than enough resources for the cats so they don't feel in competition. Resources include litter boxes, scratching posts, high resting spaces, food/water bowls, toys, playtime and one-on-one time with you. ■ Work on establishing positive relationships among the cats. (See the chart entitled "The cats in the home are not getting along" on p. 31.)



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II. SCRATCHING INAPPROPRIATE OBJECTS

Use the following framework to assist cat owners in training their cats to use scratching posts.

Cat is scratching objects that she shouldn't	
Why do cats scratch?	Cats have a natural need to scratch and scratching serves many purposes. Cats scratch to: ■ Stretch while digging their nails into something sturdy. ■ Reduce stress or express excitement. ■ Indicate their territory placing a visual marker on the object, along with a scent (cats have scent glands on the pads of their feet). ■ Remove the dead part of the nail, allowing for a new, sharper nail to emerge. Scratching itself is not the problem. Scratching can become a problem if the cat does not have a suitable and appropriate scratching option and/or has become conditioned to scratching an inappropriate object in the home, like furniture, walls or carpeting.
What advice should I give the client?	■ Make sure the cat has a quality scratching post. The post should be at least three feet tall, sturdy (it should not wobble when the cat scratches it) and it should be made of a type of rope called sisal. If the client cannot afford a good scratching post, sturdy cardboard or wood can be used. ■ Place the post where the cat likes to scratch. If the cat likes to scratch the couch, place the post right next to the couch. Some cats prefer to scratch horizontally (most scratch vertically); if this is the case, either place the scratching post on its side or purchase a corrugated cardboard scratching pad. ■ Encourage the cat to use the scratching post by: □ Rubbing catnip on the post. □ Engaging the cat in interactive play right near the post so she will scratch it while playing. □ Scratching the post yourself (cats like to mimic our behavior). □ Note: Do not place the cat's paws on the post. This may frighten the cat or scare her from using the post. ■ Deter the cat from scratching the inappropriate object(s) while the cat learns to use the scratching post. A good deterrent for furniture is to wrap it with a tight-fitting sheet. Double sided sticky tape, available at pet stores, can also be used, as well as a thick, plastic shower curtain. Once the cat is routinely using the scratching post, you can remove the deterrent. ■ Cut your cat's nails once a month.



III. CLIMBING/RESTING ON INAPPROPRIATE OBJECTS

Use the following framework to help cat owners train their cats to climb and jump on appropriate surfaces.

The cat is climbing/resting on inappropriate objects in the home	
Why do cats climb and like high resting spaces?	Cats climb and rest because: ■ They feel most safe and secure when they can view their surroundings from above and when they can rest/sleep on a high surface. ■ Climbing itself is an enjoyable activity. Climbing and resting on high surfaces can become a problem if the cat does not have suitable and appropriate high resting spaces and/or has become conditioned to climbing and/or resting on an inappropriate object. This could include furniture, counters, cabinets, closets and more.
What advice should I give the client?	■ Provide the cat with suitable alternatives for climbing and perching. The best options are cat trees, although these can be expensive. You can create high resting spaces using space that already exists. Shelves, cabinets, desks, chairs, dressers and closet space can all be adapted for a cat. Place a comfortable blanket in the location and routinely leave treats or catnip there to entice the cat. Pay attention to where the cat already likes to rest and try to provide another option nearby. □ <i>Note:</i> High resting spaces can range from a few inches off the ground to the ceiling. A cushion on the floor may be a suitable height for some cats. Other cats may want to be as high as possible. ■ Deter the cat from climbing/perching on the areas that you want to keep off-limits. Possible deterrents include: □ Double-sided tape (cats don't like walking on sticky surfaces). □ Aluminum trays filled with a couple of inches of water (cats don't like walking in water). □ Carpet runners or car mats with the spiky nubs face up (cats don't like walking on spiky surfaces). ■ Once the cat is routinely using the new high resting space, remove the deterrent.



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IV. PLAY AGGRESSION

A cat who exhibits play aggression is under-stimulated and is acting on his natural need to stalk and pounce, albeit on an inappropriate target (a person or other cat).

Here is a typical example of a cat exhibiting play aggression:

Andrew rescued Hamlet when he was a kitten two years ago. Hamlet loves Andrew and often seeks his attention. Andrew's only concern is that several times a day, often in the morning and evening, Hamlet pounces on Andrew's legs and feet when he's walking around his apartment. Hamlet also stalks and pounces on Georgie, the other cat in the home. Hamlet and Georgie often sleep near each other and otherwise seem to get along. Andrew makes sure that he pets Hamlet every day, but he doesn't get much of a chance to play with him.

Use the following framework to help cat owners deter their cats from play aggression.



A fishing rod toy, one of the best types of interactive toys, is particularly useful for engaging cats exhibiting play aggression.

Cat Is scratching objects that she shouldn't	
What is play aggression?	Play aggression is not actual aggression because the cat is not trying to harm another cat or person, nor is the cat fearful or upset. Play aggression is usually exhibited by a cat who is not getting enough physical stimulation and is looking for some way to burn off energy. Chasing or pouncing on a person or another cat and then running away when the other animal/person reacts is a good way to be active when there are no other options. Play aggression can be annoying and upsetting for other cats and people in the home who are the targets of the play aggression. No one wants to be pounced on or latched onto suddenly, and cats' claws can cause injury.
What are indications that a cat is displaying play aggression?	The cat might: ■ Be a friendly and social cat who sometimes stalks and pounces on or chases another cat in the home. ■ Be a friendly and social cat who sometimes stalks and/or pounces on a person walking by, or pounces on a person while they are sitting down or sleeping. ■ Run away once the targeted cat or person reacts (with a scream or yell). ■ Cause superficial scratches but not significant injury. ■ Exhibit this behavior in the mornings and evenings (when cats have the most energy).
What advice should I give the client?	■ Identify when during the day the cat is most likely to show play aggression and engage the cat in a 10–15 minute interactive play session around this time. The cat should have at least two interactive play sessions a day. Feeding the cat a meal following each play session will make the cat relaxed and likely to sleep following the play session and meal. ■ Provide the cat with other types of environmental enrichment to keep him occupied. This can include window perches, cardboard boxes or paper bags to explore and a rotation of solo toys to play with. ■ If the cat tends to pounce on feet or legs when a person walks by, get the cat out of this habit by tossing treats or toys when walking by the cat, or distract the cat with an interactive toy before the cat shows any initial reaction.

V. PETTING-INDUCED AGGRESSION

This is another common type of aggression. In this case, the cat becomes agitated or uncomfortable while being pet and swats or bites as a result.

Here is a typical example of a cat exhibiting petting-induced aggression:

Midge is described by her owner, Jennifer, as a friendly, social cat who enjoys being pet. However, sometimes while Jennifer is stroking her back, Midge turns around “out of the blue” and bites her on the hand. The bites are more annoying than painful, although a few times while being scratched on her chest Midge has scratched Jennifer, and these scratches did hurt.

Use the following framework to help cat owners deter their cats from petting-induced aggression.



Cat Is scratching objects that she shouldn't	
What is petting-induced aggression?	Petting-induced aggression occurs when a cat is pet in an area that makes the cat feel vulnerable (like the cat's belly), becomes overstimulated and/or agitated as a result of the petting or doesn't like being pet in that location. Petting-induced aggression can be annoying and even upsetting for the cat's owner, who might not understand why the cat is exhibiting this behavior and could misinterpret the behavior as there being something wrong with the cat.
What are indications that a cat is displaying petting-induced aggression?	The cat might: ■ Be friendly and social, and sometimes like being pet, but sometimes swats or bites at the person's hands or arms while being pet. ■ Cause superficial scratches or bites, but typically not any significant injury.
What advice should I give the client?	■ Pay attention to where the cat likes and does not like to be pet on her body and only pet her where she is comfortable. Most cats are comfortable with the tops of their heads, backs of their necks and chins being pet. Some cats are also comfortable with their backs being pet. Most cats do not like having their bellies or chests pet. ■ Pay attention to how the cat likes to be pet and only pet her in ways with which she is comfortable. Some cats like to be pet with quick, short strokes and others with slower, longer strokes. ■ Pay attention to warning signs that the cat is becoming agitated. Warning signs include tail swishing, hair on the back rising, skin twitching, the cat looking back at the person doing the petting, sudden vocalization and shifting of position. Once you have this information, stop the petting well before the cat shows these warning signs. For example, if the cat starts swishing her tail after two minutes of petting on her back, stop the petting at 90 seconds. Over time, the length of the petting can be gradually increased so the cat slowly becomes more comfortable to petting for longer periods of time. ■ Provide the cat with twice-daily interactive play and other types of environmental enrichment to keep him occupied. Cats who are under-stimulated are sometimes more likely to show petting-induced aggression.

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VI. FEAR-BASED AGGRESSION

Most cat aggression is fear-based. Understanding how to make a cat feel safe and secure in her territory is often the key to resolving this behavior. Cats can be fearful because they are ill or injured or because of an upsetting change in the home, which from our point of view might seem minor or wholly insignificant.

Here are a few examples of cats exhibiting fear aggression.

When Peggy is alone with her owner, Joann, she is described as the “sweetest cat.” However, anytime Joann has guests visit, Peggy “goes crazy.” She hisses and growls, and if anyone comes within five feet of her, she runs towards their legs and starts swatting and biting. The situation is so bad that Joann rarely has guests visit.

James brought a new furniture set into his house yesterday. Now his cat, Bella, is “flipping out,” pacing and growling. When James tried to comfort her, she bit him on the hand.

One specific type of fear aggression is **redirected aggression**. This happens when a cat is suddenly very scared by something which he can’t get to the source of (like an outdoor cat, or a scary, sudden sound), so he instinctively goes into fight mode and attacks whoever is nearest to him, person or animal. **For example:** Denise was talking to her friend on the phone while she prepared to feed her cat, Smokey. In the process she knocked over a glass pitcher that landed on the floor and shattered. Denise screamed and Smokey attacked her leg, causing deep puncture wounds and scratches.



Also related to fear aggression is **pain-induced aggression**. A cat who is ill or in pain may react aggressively if approached or touched because they feel vulnerable. **For example:** Adrienne’s cat, Buffy, is an indoor-outdoor cat and unbeknownst to Adrienne, Buffy was badly scratched by another cat at the base of her tail. The wound abscessed, and when Adrienne went to brush Buffy she unintentionally caused her pain. Buffy instinctively turned and bit her owner on the wrist, causing a deep puncture.

Use the following framework to help cat owners resolve fear-based aggression.

The cat is displaying fear-based aggression	
What is fear-based aggression?	Fear makes a cat feel vulnerable and, as a result, the cat may show aggressive behaviors. In some cases, fearful cats only attempt to harm if approached. In other cases, fearful cats acquire the mentality of “the best defense is a good offense” and attack. Fear-based aggression is upsetting and potentially dangerous for the cat’s owner, who is often unaware of potential triggers that could be causing the behavior. For many owners, the behavior doesn’t make sense and seems to happen “out of the blue.”
What are indications that a cat is displaying fear-based aggression?	The cat: ■ Exhibits body language and vocalization that indicate stress and fear, such as hissing, growling, arched back, hair on end, hiding, swatting, etc. ■ Has experienced a change in the home environment that could cause stress, such as new people, pets, sounds, smells, objects, routines or the appearance of outdoor cats. ■ Seems to be ill; for example, he: □ Doesn’t eat or drink. □ Changes his litter box habits. □ Loses weight. □ Hides.

The cat is displaying fear-based aggression (cont.)

What advice should I give the client?

- Provide the cat with a home environment that creates a sense of safety and security. (See Section 1 of the guide for more information.) Try to identify the source of the fear. If it's something that can be removed or is temporary (e.g., maintenance workers in the home), confine the cat in a safe space until the trigger is removed. If it's something or someone that cannot be removed, help the cat gradually feel comfortable with the stressor by engaging the cat in play and providing highly valued treats or food near the source of stress. This will help to change the cat's negative association. Take this process slowly if the cat seems uncomfortable.
- If the cat is showing redirected aggression toward a person or other cat, immediately remove the aggressor cat to a quiet, safe room (if possible). If the cat is agitated, this may require using a thick towel to safely transport the cat without causing injury to yourself. Allow the cat as much time as needed in the safe room (hours, days, maybe even weeks) to regain her sense of safety and security. Slowly introduce her to the rest of the home and ensure that the trigger, if identified, has been addressed. Redirected aggression is often a one-time incident and the behavior never happens again as long as the trigger is addressed. However, this behavior can be quite complicated and potentially dangerous; in this case, you should refer the cat owner to a professional. (See Section 5.)
- Engage the cat in gentle interactive play and see if she responds favorably. This play will help reduce her stress.
- If you suspect a medical issue (if the cat is showing pain-induced aggression), refer the client to the veterinarian.

If the situation does not improve and the cat is a risk to family members and/or other pets, seek professional assistance from a certified cat behavior consultant or a veterinary behaviorist. (See Section 5 of the guide.)

VII. NOT GETTING ALONG WITH OTHER CATS

Use the following framework to help cat owners encourage their cats to get along. Sometimes owners need only try a few simple steps to help cats who previously felt tense around each other coexist peacefully. Other times, cats must be introduced slowly or even reintroduced.

When introducing cats who have not yet met each other or reintroducing cats who do not get along, the most important thing to explain to the client is that most cats can learn to get along or at least tolerate each other, but this is often a slow process that requires patience.



The cats in the home are not getting along

Why don't cats get along sometimes?

Cats are territorial creatures. Although they can develop close bonds, most cats are initially wary and distrustful towards other cats. In some cases, cats can develop trust and feel safe around each other on their own, but in other cases, feelings of distrust or fear intensify over time. Cats usually don't work things out when they feel distrustful and/or fearful of each other; instead, owners must take proactive measures to resolve this situation.

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The cats in the home are not getting along (cont.)	
What behavior issues can arise when cats don't get along?	Unwelcome behaviors include: ■ Active bullying, which can affect the bullied cat's quality of life (e.g., eating less, withdrawing, over-grooming from the stress and other medical issues). ■ Inappropriate elimination in the home (either spray marking or avoiding the litter box by a bullied cat). ■ Active fighting among the cats.
What are indications that the cats are not getting along?	The cat(s): ■ Routinely hiss, growl and/or swat when near each other. ■ Leave urine and/or feces around the house. ■ Fight. ■ Show a change in routine (e.g., eating less, hiding more).
What advice should I give the client?	■ Increase the vertical space in the home. Cats often don't get along when they feel in competition for territory. By increasing the vertical space, you are increasing their territory. ■ Make sure there are more than enough resources so that the cats don't feel in competition with each other. This includes feeding/water bowls, litter boxes, scratching posts, hiding and high resting spaces, individual attention and playtime. ■ Have at least as many litter boxes as you have cats, plus one more. Make sure they are open boxes and are placed in open areas where a cat won't feel trapped. ■ Give the cats a reason to like each other. When they are near each other and are coexisting peacefully, offer them highly valued food or treats so they develop positive associations with each other. ■ Play with them to reduce their stress. Play is also important when one cat is very active and bothers the less active cat. ■ If needed, slowly reintroduce cats. (See "(Re)Introducing cats" on pg. 33.)

When do cats need to be reintroduced to each other slowly?	
Use this chart to help determine when a slow reintroduction of two or more cats is needed or when other steps might resolve multi-cat tensions.	
Reintroduction needed	Reintroduction not needed
The cats don't relax around each other; one or more becomes agitated and hisses or growls when they see each other.	The cats might show signs of agitation, but they tolerate each other. They engage in their normal activities although they might keep their distance.
One or more cats routinely attacks the other; there's already been an injury or it's a major concern. You've ruled out play aggression.	One or more cats is being play aggressive. ■ The "aggressor" sometimes shows relaxed, appropriate behavior with the other cat, especially during midday when cats tend to be less active. If the "attacking" happens primarily in the morning and evening, but not during midday, there is a good chance the behavior is play aggression. ■ If the "aggressor" is under-stimulated, there's a good chance it's just play aggression.
One or more cats has withdrawn, often hiding and showing other signs of stress (e.g., poor appetite, vomiting, avoidance of the litter box).	The cats show signs of affection occasionally (e.g., lying near each other, grooming each other, playing together).

Examples of when a (re)introduction is and is not needed

Use these scenarios as a guide when advising clients whose cats are experiencing tension with each other.

Reintroduction needed	Reintroduction not needed
A couple goes on vacation and the wife's parents stay at their home to care for their two cats. The parents bring their own cat and confine her to a bedroom. One night, the parents' cat escapes from the bedroom. When one of the resident cats sees this intruder, she is so frightened that she attacks the other resident cat. They are quickly separated. Although these two cats were very close in the past, now whenever they get a peek at each other through a doorway, they both immediately hiss and growl. This behavior has continued for two weeks since the original incident.	A 3-year-old cat continuously chases the 10-year-old cat in the home. The older cat is very agitated by these encounters and often winds up trapped in a corner swatting at the younger cat. This behavior happens primarily after 6:00 p.m. every night. Other times the younger cat walks by the older cat and leaves her alone. The owners play with the younger cat a couple times a week. (In this case, an under-stimulated cat is finding an outlet for his energy by chasing the older cat. The resolution to this problem is lots of interactive play and environmental enrichment. The cats should be kept apart when no one is home.)
Three months ago, a new cat was brought into the household. Since then, the resident cat's behavior has changed drastically. She used to be an outgoing, social cat, but now she spends most of the day either under the bed or on top of a dresser in the bedroom. The new cat often enters the bedroom and stares at her or lies in the middle of the bedroom floor, in which case the resident cat occasionally eliminates under the bed. The cats' owners have noted that the resident cat has been losing weight and vomiting several times a week.	Six months ago, the owner adopted a 5-year-old cat to join her household with her 7-year-old cat. The two cats do not get along. They never interact positively, and a few times a day the owner hears hissing. Sometimes they swat each other in passing. There have not been any other physical altercations and both cats are eating well and using the litter box. They both enjoy their various resting spaces. (The resolution to this situation is to increase the territory by adding vertical space and to give these cats a reason to like each other. Several times a day, offer them highly valued treats or food in the same vicinity. Toss treats to the cats anytime they are resting somewhat near each other or coexisting peacefully.)

(Re)introducing cats to help them get along

Take these steps when two or more cats are experiencing tension and conflict that requires them to be temporarily separated and then reintroduced. These steps are also useful for introducing two cats who have never met.

Step 1: Isolation	Isolate the cats from each other for as long as needed. The longer they are isolated from each other, the more likely you'll have success in the next steps. Ensure that they are all getting plenty of attention and playtime. You could alternate the areas in which they are confined so that they get used to being in all areas of the home without the other cat(s) present. Switch their bedding so they get used to each other's smells. Do not move on to any further steps until all the cats are showing calm, relaxed behavior.
Step 2: Positive associations	Try this activity when the cats are likely to be hungry. Secure a sturdy baby gate, one that is three to four feet high, in the doorway of the room where one cat is separated. Cover the baby gate with a sheet so the cats can't see each other. Be prepared with highly valued treats or food that you know the cats really love. Remove the sheet for a moment or two until the cats see each other. In a happy voice, say "Good girls!" and toss them all a treat, and then cover the baby gate with the sheet. This is easier to do if there is a second person, but a single person can do it. Repeat this activity five to 10 times in a row a few times a day. If you see that the cats are not reacting to the presence of the other cat(s) and are eating the treats, you can gradually increase the amount of time that they see each other. Once this process is going well, start giving the cats their meals on opposite sides of the gate. You can give them more frequent but smaller meals each day so that you have more opportunities for this activity. Start by feeding them at a distance from each other; if this goes well (if they focus on eating their food and not on each other), reduce the space between their food dishes. Always monitor them during this time. The point of stage two is to get the cats to associate each other with good things (treats and food) so they don't go into attack or flight mode.

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(Re)introducing cats to help them get along (cont.)	
Step 3: Play	When step two is going well, you can begin to play with the cats at the same time. The best type of toy for this is the fishing rod toy, which has a rod, a 3-foot string and two feathers attached to the string. You don't want the cats to use the same toy, so have one toy in each hand or ask someone else to assist you. First, play with them while you stand next to the gate so the cats are near each other but still separated. Keep the play sessions short. Always stop the play on a good note (before there are any negative interactions) and reward the cats with a treat. If things are going well, gradually increase the amount of time you play with them. After some time, if the cats enjoy the play and do not react negatively to each other, you can begin to play with the cats, still using two toys, without the gate in the way.
Step 4: Supervised time	By now, the cats are able to eat and play near each other in peace. At this point, you can give them supervised time together without a barrier. During this time you must be vigilant; at the slightest indication of potential bullying (stalking or hard staring), you should distract and redirect the cats by showing them the fishing rod toy or some other toy or treats that you know will effectively distract them. This is crucial; you must be prepared to distract and redirect any potential aggression. Continue to play with the cats and end their time together on a good note by giving treats. Gradually extend the amount of time that you allow the cats to be in the same area under close supervision. It will likely take some time to get to the point where the cats can be unsupervised, but it's well worth going slow with the introduction or reintroduction.

CONCLUSION

Congratulations! You now have the cat behavior knowledge that is necessary to successfully assist cats and their owners. Below is a case information form you can use when speaking with clients. It provides detailed questions to ask cat owners regarding their behavior concerns, along with a framework in which to organize the information you collect.



The following document provides useful questions to ask clients about the common behavior issues discussed in this guide. Please note that this is not a comprehensive list.

Cat behavior case information form

Stated behavior problem: _____

How long the behavior has existed: _____

Basic information

Cat's name(s): _____ Age: _____ Sex: M / F Spay/Neutered: Y / N

How long has cat been in home: _____

Where the cat came from: _____

Household information

Other pets in household (name, age, sex, s/n): _____

People in household: _____

Ages of children: _____

Home environment information

Size of home: _____

Is cat kept strictly indoors? _____

How much interactive play is the cat getting daily? _____

From the cat's point of view, is the home cat-friendly (e.g., are there high resting spaces, hiding spaces, scratching posts, other environmental enrichment)?:

Type of household (quiet, loud, busy): _____

Any changes in the home recently, big or small, that may have stressed the cat (e.g., new people/pets, schedules, sounds, smells, objects)?:

Avoidance of litter box

Urination and defecation outside the box? How often is the cat avoiding the litter box? How often is the cat using the litter box? Where is the cat eliminating outside the box? Is there any noticeable pattern as to when the cat eliminates outside the box? (Time of day? Home alone?)

Has cat been to the veterinarian recently and was a medical issue discovered? Is there reason to think cat may be in discomfort when eliminating?

How many litter boxes? What kind of boxes are they? Where are they located? What type of litter is used? How often are they scooped/cleaned?

Have there been any changes in the home, big or small, that may have caused the cat stress? Any other possible sources of stress for the cat?

Do the cats get along with each other? Is it possible that one cat is bullying another cat?

Scratching issues

What item(s) are being scratched? Are there good scratching post alternatives? Where are they located? Are there current deterrents in place?

Inter-cat tensions

What is the behavior you are observing? Who seems to be bullying whom? How often? When did the problem start? Are there litter box issues or other behaviors associated with the problem? Do the cats ever have positive interactions with each other? Are there adequate territory and resources for each cat? Is there adequate daily stimulation for each cat? Has the client taken proactive steps to resolve the issue?

Aggression issues

What is the cat doing? When did this behavior begin? When is the behavior occurring? Apparent triggers for behavior? Severity of behavior? Vet visit made? Proactive steps taken by client to resolve issue?

Advice offered

When follow-up call should be made:



Knowing when professional help is needed

It's important to remember that despite all our knowledge and enthusiasm, there will be cases that require professional assistance from a certified cat behavior consultant or a veterinary behaviorist. This is often the case when a cat is causing, or potentially could cause, significant injury to a person or other animal in the home. As cat behavior counselors, we can probably handle basic aggression cases, like play aggression, petting-induced aggression and fear-based aggression (as long as the aggression is not unpredictable and is not causing significant injury). There's a big difference between a cat who bites or scratches only when cornered and a cat who chases someone down the hallway and lunges at their leg. Similarly, there's a big difference between two cats who swat or hiss at each other when passing and a cat who viciously attacks another cat on sight.

If a case makes you uncomfortable or nervous, go with your instinct and advise the client that professional help is needed. Ideally, you can create a partnership with professionals in your community so you can ask their advice and refer clients as needed.

Certified cat behavior consultants: A certified cat behavior consultant is certified by the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants. To become certified, an individual must provide documentation of 500 hours of animal behavior consulting, 400 hours of coursework and participation in seminars and mentorships. There is no official school or program to become a certified cat behavior consultant, but consultants must meet those criteria. IAABC's website, iaabc.org, is an excellent resource for finding certified cat behavior consultants.

Veterinary behaviorists: These are veterinarians who have also achieved board certification in the specialty of veterinary behavior. In other words, they are vets with a tremendous amount of knowledge about behavior and can use their expansive knowledge of both behavior modification and veterinary medicine to treat animals with complicated behavior issues. Information on veterinary behaviorists, including how to find one in your community, is located at dacvb.com. Note that veterinary behaviorist consults are typically very expensive.





Delivering cat behavior counseling to your community

Now that you possess a comprehensive understanding of cat behavior and how to effectively communicate with cat owners, you will want to consider how best to deliver this service to the people in your community who need it. The most impactful way to prevent cat homelessness is to reach people with cats before they are having behavior problems that reach a crisis point. There are many ways to do this, and we offer a few models for your consideration.

1. Provide a help line and market the service to the community. (See the two case studies below.)
2. Follow the Pets for Life model, which uses door-to-door, block-by-block community outreach to build trust-based relationships with people and establish an ongoing presence in the community that ultimately makes a huge impact. Visit humanesociety.org/petsforlife for more information.
3. Offer a help desk like that of the Nevada Humane Society, which “provides free assistance and information to anyone who has a question or problem with her pet or other animals in the community.” Visit nevadahumanesociety.org for more information.
4. Enhance a current behavior program, for example by adding a cat behavior counseling resource onto an existing dog training community resource.



DELIVERING CAT BEHAVIOR COUNSELING



Below are two case studies of implementing a help line. As you'll see, it's a simple process with a very big payoff in terms of the number of cats who remain in their homes.

CASE STUDY #1: HELP LINE RUN BY A SHELTER (ST. HUBERT'S ANIMAL WELFARE CENTER, NJ)

Type of organization

Private shelter handling approximately eight calls per week

Recipients of this service

Any cat owners in the community with a cat behavior concern

Service delivery method

Program supervisor: The Pet Retention and Special Project Coordinator is responsible for assisting clients who contact the help line.

Indirect involvement of other staff or volunteers: Information and charts from this guide were reviewed with other shelter staff to give them a thorough basic knowledge of the most common cat behavior issues. This prepares them to advise a cat owner who enters the shelter seeking cat behavior counseling while the counselor is unavailable.

Program logistics

The help line phone is the number of the program supervisor's office phone (a landline). Callers are instructed to leave a message. The program supervisor contacts the callers in the order received unless a case seems particularly urgent. The help line message includes details about when the help line is open and states that messages will be returned on the days that the help line is open. The message gives callers an email address to use if the matter is urgent and cannot wait a day or two (if the program supervisor is off on the day of the call).

Marketing the program

The shelter's website features a banner advertising the help line to all cat owners with behavior questions or concerns. A special Facebook page was created for the help line. The shelter's general Facebook page also advertises the help line. Brochures and flyers are distributed at community events and at several vet offices and pet stores. The other shelters and rescues in the community know about the program and are encouraged to refer cat owners to the help line.

Note on statistics

It's important to keep statistics to assess how effectively the program solves cat behavior issues and ultimately decreases the

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number of cats who are surrendered. (See the form under Case Study #2 for items to track.)

CASE STUDY #2: HELP LINE RUN BY A RESCUE ORGANIZATION

Type of organization

Rescue group handling approximately 10 calls per week

Recipients of this service

Any cat owners in the community with a cat behavior concern

Service delivery method

Program supervisor: Adoptions Coordinator, who is a volunteer of the rescue group

Program logistics

The help line phone is a mobile phone paid for by the rescue group on a \$25/month plan. Callers are instructed to leave a message, and the volunteer contacts the callers in the order received

unless a case seems particularly urgent. Calls are returned on the same day unless the volunteer is unavailable and deems the call not urgent.

Marketing the program

The municipal shelter, various private shelters and other rescue groups in the community refer cat owners to the help line, both those inquiring about surrendering their cat because of a behavior issue and adopters who are concerned about behavior issues. The local low-cost spay/neuter clinic and several reduced cost veterinarians have brochures advertising the help line. Also, all callers who contact the rescue group to ask about surrendering their cats because of a behavior issue are referred to the help line.

Statistics

It's important to keep statistics to assess how effectively the program solves cat behavior issues and ultimately decreases the number of cats who are surrendered.

Here's how the shelter and rescue group track their statistics.

Month	Number of clients assisted	Type of behavior issue (litter box, scratching, inter-cat aggression, other aggression)	Successful resolution	Pending case	Cat(s) surrendered	Outcome unknown

Additional resources

The following websites offer additional, useful information on cat behavior issues:

- American Association of Feline Practitioners: catvets.com/cat-owners/brochures
- Indoor Pet Initiative: indoorpet.osu.edu/cats/resources/
- Pam Johnson-Bennett: catbehaviorassociates.com
- The HSUS Cat Answer Tool: humanesociety.org/cat

NOTES

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