

## SETTING UP THE ENVIRONMENT FOR SUCCESS

Veterinarians are uniquely positioned to aid caregivers in understanding normal feline behavior, preventing undesirable behaviors, and providing information on positive reinforcement training. Successful positive reinforcement training can strengthen the caregiver-cat bond and improve the quality of life for the individual cat.

### Understanding Normal Feline Behavior

- As both a predator and a prey species, cats are naturally solitary hunters, and their hunting instincts persist in the home environment.
- Without appropriate outlets for those instincts, normal feline behaviors may manifest in a way that is undesirable to the caregivers in the home.
- Normal feline behaviors may vary based on life stage (see the *2021 AAHA/AAFP Feline Life Stage Guidelines*).

### Object Play Behavior

- Normal play behavior in cats and kittens mimics the hunt. Chasing, pouncing, biting, and clawing their “prey” is normal.
- Most kittens have a very strong play drive, while normal play behavior in senior cats may be more subdued.
- Object play behavior can also be highly individual, with some cats playing more than others.

### Social Play Behavior

- Social play, in which cats direct these behaviors toward a companion cat, can also occur.
  - Healthy social play can look like fighting, but play can be distinguished through an observation of the interactions between the cats
  - Social play, as opposed to object play, typically wanes at social maturity, at ~1–2 years of age
    - A young cat will often want to play socially with a cat that is socially mature and who doesn’t appreciate or reciprocate the play, especially if there is insufficient object play for the younger cat
- For more information on social play, see the *2024 AAFP Intercat Tension Guidelines: Recognition, Prevention, and Management* and Video 7: Play between two affiliated cats in a multi-cat household in the Practice Guideline supplemental materials.

## Urination & Defecation

- When not constrained by a home environment, cats will often dig and posture around a large area before settling on a spot to urinate or defecate.
- Soft substrates (e.g., sand, dirt), which can be used to bury the urine or fecal matter, are typically preferred.
- Urine and feces also contain pheromones, which send communicative signals to other cats in the environment.
  - Messages communicated include the time of the cat's presence, sexual or mating status, and emotional state
  - Therefore, it is normal for urine (and rarely fecal) marking to occur in a large variety of areas
  - The deposition of scent, so that the environment contains the cat's smell, can provide a calming effect for cats
- Urine or fecal soiling or marking outside of the litter box is undesirable for caregivers but not inappropriate for the cat. Causes include an underlying medical problem, feline idiopathic cystitis, or other sources of distress in the physical and/or social environment of the cat (see *2014 AAFP/ISFM Guidelines for Diagnosing and Solving House-soiling Behavior in Cats*, *2013 AAFP/ISFM Environmental Needs Guidelines*, and *2024 AAFP Intercat Tension Guidelines: Recognition, Prevention, and Management*).

## Scratching

- Scratching is a normal feline behavior that functions to maintain claw health, deposit the cat's scent in the environment, and leave a visual cue to other cats of the cat's presence.
- Cats may have preferences for different types of scratching surfaces; carpet, wood, rope, and cardboard are commonly preferred substrates.
- Also, cats may prefer scratching surfaces that are vertical, horizontal, or angled.
- These preferences may change with life stage, particularly if chronic conditions such as degenerative joint disease develop as the cat matures.
  - An example is a senior cat who previously scratched on vertical surfaces and now only scratches on horizontal surfaces
- See the *FelineVMA Claw Friendly Educational Toolkit* for more details.

## Jumping and Climbing on (or under) Furniture

- In an outdoor environment, it is normal behavior for cats to climb trees in order to survey the area or to hide from what they fear.
- Vertical space and hiding options, such as cat beds and boxes, are critically important in an indoor environment to provide elevated options and to increase overall space. These preferences may also vary depending on life stage.

## Attention-seeking Behaviors

- Certain vocal cues, such as the cat's meow, are often targeted toward the caregiver in order to solicit attention.
- Cats may also return to locations in which attention has previously been given (such as jumping into the caregiver's lap, onto a desk, or into the bed).
- Cats engage in other human-directed social behaviors, such as rubbing (when the cat rubs part of their body against a person).
  - Rubbing is often directed toward the caregiver when the cat is seeking attention or when the cat has been reunited with their caregiver after a brief separation, and it helps strengthen the human-cat relationship
  - Engaging in rubbing on furniture and/or other surfaces marks territory and can help calm the cat in stressful situations
- Some normal attention-seeking behaviors may be undesirable to the caregiver (e.g., vocalizing), and those undesirable behaviors may have been unintentionally positively reinforced by the caregiver by previously giving the cat attention while the cat was engaging in such behavior.

## Eagerness to Learn

- Cats of all ages have the ability to learn from their surroundings. Energy level, curiosity, attention span, and motivation to learn are traits which are highly variable in cats, with some individuals having significantly more drive to learn than others.
- Certain breeds have a tendency to possess these traits more prominently.
- Any individual cat, in which these traits are strong, may have a propensity for boredom and will require a greater investment on the part of the caregiver to meet the cat's environmental needs and prevent unwanted behaviors.
- Positive reinforcement training is important for all cats (e.g., carrier training), but essential for individual cats with boredom.

## Distress and Learning

- Fear-anxiety, pain, frustration, and other protective (negative) emotions may interfere with learning.
- Distress occurs when these protective emotions exceed the individual cat's coping abilities.
- Cats experiencing distress may react with appeasement (occurs less frequently in cats than other responses), inhibition, avoidance, and/or repelling behavioral responses (see *2022 AAFP/ISFM Cat Friendly Veterinary Interaction Guidelines: Approach and Handling Techniques*).
  - Repelling behavior usually only occurs in the absence of the ability for the cat to successfully avoid what they perceive to be a threat
  - The cat may exhibit protective emotions, demonstrated through body language
    - Facial expressions change more quickly than body language and include rotating the ears to the side or back, partially or fully dilating the pupils, rapidly blinking, staring, engaging in excessive lip-licking, and/or tightening or splaying the whiskers
    - Body language includes hypervigilance, lack of or feigned sleep, breathing rapidly, crouching, arching their back, and piloerection

## Feline Emotions and Behavior Scale

Feline communication — What is the cat telling us?

Facial expressions: more immediate response



Calm



Progression from mild to increased intensity of protective emotions (e.g., fear) and behavioral responses.



Images courtesy of Dr. Ilona Rodan

- A crouched stance, piloerection, hissing, or growling also may indicate the cat is experiencing distress
- Creating the right environment, which minimizes protective emotions and distress, is critical to maximizing the cat's ability to learn.

### Meet Environmental Needs

- First and foremost, each cat's environmental needs must be met.
- The cat must perceive the environment as safe; providing hiding and climbing surfaces, which allow the cat a sense of safety, control, and familiarity within their environment.
- Multiple and separate key environmental resources, including food, water, resting spaces, toileting areas, scratching surfaces, and opportunity for play/predatory behavior, must be provided.
- These resources must be dispersed throughout the cat's environment and provided in the correct locations for the cat.
- Items that cats leave their scent on, such as toileting areas and scratching surfaces, should be spread out within the home and located in areas of the house where the cat spends time.
- Interactions with humans in the environment should be positive, predictable, consistent, and tailored to the preferences of the individual cat. Finally, the environment must respect the cat's senses, including smell (see the 2024 AAFP *Intercat Tension Guidelines: Recognition, Prevention, and Management*, 2022 ISFM/AAFP *Cat Friendly Veterinary Environment Guidelines*, and the 2013 AAFP/ISFM *Environmental Needs Guidelines* for more information).

### Reduce Stressors in the Environment

- Cats prefer a familiar space with hiding and perching options.
- Unfamiliar smells, sounds, sights, and tastes are often perceived as threatening to a cat and should be avoided when possible. When not possible, they should be gradually introduced at a pace or intensity that does not cause feline fear-anxiety.
- Strong or offensive smells, loud or offensive sounds, undesirable tastes, cold surfaces, and visual threats can add to the cat's distress and should be avoided.

### Minimize Distractions

- Both the cat and the caregiver involved in the positive reinforcement training exercise should be engaged and focused.

- If either the cat or the caregiver is distracted, training is less likely to be successful.
- Training sessions in which the caregiver or cat begin to become distracted or frustrated should be promptly ended to ensure training sessions stay rewarding for both individuals.

### Optimize Rewards to Cater to Individual Preferences

- Food rewards are very commonly used in positive reinforcement training. Although food may be an effective reward for many cats, other individual cats may prefer alternative rewards, such as petting, play, or brushing (see the Positive Reinforcement Techniques to Prevent Unwanted Behaviors section of this Toolkit for more information).
- Regardless of what reward is chosen, the individual cat's preferences must be the priority in order to use the reward for positive reinforcement training.
  - Treats are more likely to be successful for a food-motivated cat, whereas human affection is more likely to be successful in cats who exhibit attention-seeking behavior. See the Positive Reinforcement Techniques to Prevent Unwanted Behaviors section of this Toolkit for more information on how to identify preferred rewards for training

### Start Early

- Positive reinforcement training may be performed at any age.
- However, beginning an individual cat's training during kittenhood can prevent undesirable behaviors from developing and can strengthen the caregiver-cat bond.

### Smaller, More Frequent Training Sessions

- The feline attention span is short, and repetition is required for successful learning. Therefore, shorter, more frequent training sessions tend to be more successful than longer training periods.
- Caregivers should aim for multiple 5–10-minute training sessions per day rather than scheduling an hour block to work with the cat.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Normal Behaviors:** Scratching, climbing, hunting-style play, and scent marking are normal feline behaviors—even if sometimes undesirable to caregivers.
- **Environment Matters:** Providing safe spaces, hiding spots, multiple resources, and vertical areas help reduce stress and prevent unwanted behaviors.
- **Reward Training:** Reward-based training prevents unwanted behaviors, promotes desired behaviors, and strengthens the caregiver-cat bond. Start early and keep sessions short and frequent.
- **Individual Preferences:** Use each cat's preferred reward—food, play, or attention—for the best results.
- **Attention-Seeking & Unwanted Behaviors:** Be mindful to avoid unintentionally reinforcing behaviors like vocalizing or scratching by giving attention at the wrong times.
- **Recognize Signs of Distress:** Fear-anxiety, pain, or frustration can interfere with learning. Watch for changes in body language and seek veterinary assessment if needed.
- **Reduce Stressors:** Minimize unfamiliar smells, sounds, and sights; introduce changes slowly to prevent fear-anxiety.

