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CONTROLLING UNDESIRABLE BEHAVIOR IN CATS - THE ROLE OF PUNISHMENT

Feline Punishment

Punishment is the application of a stimulus that decreases the chance that a behavior will be repeated. It must coincide with the undesirable behavior, and must be unpleasant enough to deter the cat from repeating that behavior. Keep in mind that you are punishing the behavior not the cat. Punishment should never be considered unless the pet has the means to satisfy its nature and its needs. For example, the scratching cat should be provided with an appropriate scratching post, before any attempts to punish undesirable scratching is initiated.

One of the most frequently utilized and least successful forms of punishment is where the owner uses a direct swat or hit. Hitting a cat can lead to hand-shyness, fear of the owner, and potential injury for both the owner and the cat. The cat will continue to perform the undesirable behavior in your absence since it learns that it can perform the behavior without punishment when you are out of sight. Physical punishment is therefore ineffective, potentially dangerous, and totally unnecessary.

How can I punish my cat for rough play?

Perhaps the only place where interactive punishment might be successful is for the cat that swats or scratches the owners in play. Even here, species appropriate punishment such as "hissing" or the use of a punishment device is better than using any physical techniques. Before punishment is considered however, the cat must be given ample opportunity to play. Toys that can be chased, swatted, and batted should be provided. Realize that if you give any form of attention (including physical punishment) to a cat that is swatting, or attacking in play, the behavior may actually be rewarded and further encouraged.

Whenever the cat begins to swat or play attack, immediately stop the play by walking away or by using some non physical form of punishment such as a water sprayer, can of compressed air, cap gun, hand held alarm or perhaps a loud hiss. **Under no circumstances should a cat ever be punished unless it is caught in the act of performing the behavior.** Remember, physical punishment should never be used as it is generally ineffective, and could cause harm to your relationship with your cat, or to the cat itself.

How can I punish my cat for other behaviors?

The key to successful punishment is to associate an unpleasant consequence with the undesirable behavior. However, unless the owner remains out of sight while administering punishment the cat may learn to cease the behavior only when you are present. Punishing the cat remotely, while you remain out of sight, is an effective means of deterring undesirable behavior. It takes a great deal of preparation, time and forethought. Another effective means of punishment is to booby-trap an area, so that the cat learns to "stay away".

How does remote punishment work?

For remote techniques to be successful there are two key elements. First, you must monitor the cat while out of sight so that you know when the problem begins. The second element is that the punishment must be delivered while the inappropriate behavior is occurring (while you remain out of sight).

1) Keep a close watch on the problem area while hidden around a corner, in a nearby closet, or behind a piece of furniture. Or, monitor your cat using a video camera, intercom, or a motion detector (such as the Tattle Tale monitor, which makes a loud beep whenever it is disturbed).

2) As soon as the cat enters the area or begins to perform the undesirable behavior (climb, scratch), use a long range water pistol, noise device (such as cap gun) or remote control device to chase the cat away.

3) If the cat cannot determine where the noise or water is coming from, it should quickly learn to stay away from the area whether the owner is present or not.

An alternative is to set up a remote control switch near the problem area and have a device such as a water pik, alarm, or hair dryer plugged in. As soon as the cat enters the area, the device can then be turned on by remote control to scare the cat away.

When the owner is not around to supervise and monitor, the cat needs to be left in a room or area that has been cat-proofed and supplied with a litter box, bedding area, toys for play and areas for scratching or climbing.

How can I booby trap the environment to punish the pet?

Punishing the behavior remotely, with you out of sight, is impractical if the cat cannot be prevented from performing the undesirable behavior, when you are not there to supervise and monitor. Booby traps are a way of teaching the pet to avoid the area or the behavior itself. The most practical devices are those that are unpleasant enough to deter the behavior, and reset themselves, or remain active should the pet return to the area. One of the simplest ways to discourage a cat from entering an area where an undesirable behavior is likely to be performed (scratching, eliminating) is to make the area less appealing (or downright unpleasant) for scratching or eliminating. If the cat is scratching furniture, a large piece of material draped over the furniture may do the trick, since the cat won't be able to get its claws into the loose fabric. A small pyramid of empty tin cans or plastic containers could also be balanced on the arm of a chair so that it topples onto the cat when scratching begins. A piece of plastic carpet runner with the "nubs" facing up can be placed over a scratched piece of furniture to reduce its appeal, or a few strips of double-sided sticky tape would send most cats bolting for another place to scratch (hopefully the scratching post). Mousetrap trainers, shock mats, or motion detector alarms are also very effective at keeping cats away from problem areas. A motion-detecting sprinkler is also available to keep other cats or animals off of the property.

Most of these same booby traps would also be effective for destructive behaviors such as chewing and sucking. Taste deterrents might also be helpful, provided they are unpleasant enough to deter the behavior. Never leave any objects or areas untreated until the cat learns to leave the object or area alone.

Perhaps most important, punishment whether interactive or remote should never be a substitute for good supervision and the opportunity to engage in the proper behavior. This is very important with kittens that are learning what is acceptable in a new home.

For very active animals, a room that has been "cat-proofed" and supplied with toys, and objects to scratch and climb, is a good solution when owners are unable to supervise.