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“Five Must-Know Aspects of Cat Behavior”

1. “Do You Smell What I Smell”

We’ll start with the fact that scents and odors are an extremely important communication channel for cats. As you’ll see later in this series, cats do not have the richly developed visual communicative displays that dogs do, which may be reason why olfaction is more important.

A fair portion of cat communication serves to facilitate avoidance of one another, and what better way to do that than to leave a scent mark. While fecal marking is not well substantiated in domestic cats, we know cats leave scent marks by depositing urine, by rubbing their facial glands on objects, and by leaving a scent as well as a visual mark when scratching. Declawed cats continue to scratch objects because they are depositing scent from glands in the foot pads.

The claim the inventors of Feliway® make is that cats won’t urine mark areas they have facially rubbed. Feliway® is purported to be a synthetic analog of the cat’s facial pheromones, so when sprayed on objects it acts as a substitute for the cat’s facial rubbing, thereby decreasing the cat’s motivation to urine mark the same spot.

Allorubbing (rubbing of another individual) occurs among cats that have developed a fair degree of familiarity with one another. In one study for example, the frequency of allorubbing among a group of unrelated, introduced cats, was almost non-existent until the cats had been together for almost a year.

Knowing how important odors are to cats is important for a number of reasons. First, scent exchanges can be used as the first step in introducing cats to others. Second, unfamiliar odors may elicit scent marking (both scratching and urine marking). Third, odors of other cats and dogs are thought to have the potential to trigger redirected aggression, a topic we’ll take up in the last Biscuit of this series. Aggression elicited by an odor (something we would be unaware of) would seem to us to be out of the blue and “unprovoked” unless we knew to consider the odor potential. Fourth, if you go to a home with cats, be aware that odors you carry in from your own pets or clients’ pets may have a significant influence on the cats’ behavior toward you.

2. If You Build It They Will Come

Failure to use the litterbox consistently is without a doubt the most common cat behavior problem and can literally be a death sentence for some cats. Although some of these problems are occasionally difficult to understand and hard to resolve, the vast majority of them can be solved with litterboxes that better meet the cat's needs.

When we house train dogs one step in the process is to create surface and location preferences that are to our dog's liking, and to ours. Dogs are predisposed not to relieve themselves in their living area. As dogs new to the home spend time inside and gradually come to view the entire house as their living space, at the same time we are creating preferences or habits for outdoor (grass, gravel, even cement) elimination.

Cats however are predisposed to relieve themselves in soft, particulate material that facilitates their ability to bury their waste. Early experience influences surface preference, but given that fact that even orphaned kittens display the species typical burying of waste, it's not necessary for kittens to learn from or mimic their moms.

Cats do not need to be taught how to scratch and bury their waste in litter or other material which is what the term "litter training" implies. It can be helpful to make sure a cat new to the home knows where the litterboxes are but it is not necessary to show it what to do in the litterbox or what the box is for. IF the characteristics of the box are to the cat's liking – something we covered in the BEN Pro Member Webinar series on cat elimination problems – the cat will use it. That's where the title of this article comes from – If You Build It, They Will Come.

Housetraining a dog requires an additional component that doesn't pertain to cats – dogs have to "figure out" a way to get their owners to give them access to the elimination area. At least most dogs do – unless there is a dog door or an indoor elimination area. There's no equivalent for this step for cats.

So what's involved in building a box cats will use? This is covered in more detail in the webinar course, but the important components are location, number of boxes, size of the box, type of litter, depth of litter, cleanliness, and "odor neutral" surroundings. Another important factor is that the cat not be frightened or harassed while using the litterbox or while on her way to the box.

If all components are to the cat's liking but she is still relieving herself elsewhere, then either we have mis-judged the cat's preferences OR failure to use the litterbox is just a symptom of another behavior problem. More often than not the culprit is some sort of fear related problem OR an underlying medical problem.

3. Cats Don't Wear Their Hearts on Their Sleeves

Those of us who are accustomed to sharing our lives with dogs know how rich their visual communication system is. In our DVD on Canine Body Language, we talk about ear carriage, tail carriage, tail movement, overall body carriage, body orientation, eyes, direction of gaze, and mouth. That's at least eight features to pay attention to. The physical conformation of dogs – especially their faces – allows them to express quite a variety of communication signals.

Compare the facial features of cats to those of dogs. Not only is there significantly less variation in the physical facial conformation of cats, (you don't see cats with floppy or cropped ears, although the Scottish Fold's ears look a bit that way) but their round faces and short noses limit the expressiveness of their faces.

These limitations as well as the cat's behavioral repertoire can make it difficult to tell when a cat is stressed, fearful or anxious. The first choice cats often make when they are afraid is to flee or hide. Because cats are mistakenly thought to be somewhat "anti-social" (a more accurate interpretation is that many cats are not well socialized) and in general are more neophobic (afraid of anything 'new') than dogs, too many owners think that it's not a problem when a cat spends most of its time hiding. But in reality this is a 'red flag'.

One measure behaviorists have used to evaluate quality of life is to look at the range of species typical behaviors an individual displays in a particular environment. When cats spend the majority of their time hiding or appearing to sleep, it's not indicative of a good quality of life.

Nadine Gorkow at the British Columbia SPCA has developed a training guide for shelter staff on the "Emotional Lives of Cats" in which she describes, among other behaviors, "feigned sleep". When cats in shelters and other stressful environments can't hide or escape (their "default" behaviors when stressed or afraid) they just "shut down" and seem to draw into themselves. They often spend significant time lying down, with their heads pulled in, tails and feet tucked in close to their bodies, and eyes closed or partially closed. This can be misinterpreted by those not knowledgeable about cats as the cat doing well and resting comfortably.

The important take-home message from this Biscuit is that cats are likely to withdraw, become less active, and/or hide when they are stressed or anxious. If you visit a home after a new dog has been obtained and the family also has a cat, it would be good to ask if the family has noticed the cat isn't as active or as visible as it was before the dog came.

With their focus being on the new dog, owners don't realize how much less they are seeing of their cat until they stop to think about it. You can then devise a plan that will help their cat adjust to the dog and create a better quality of life for their feline.

4. "Are Cats from Venus or Mars?"

Very few species of felines routinely live in groups – lions are one of the few that do. Most species of cats are solitary. Being solitary does NOT mean that an individual isn't capable of having social relationships with others or establishing social bonds. Solitary means that the species is able to reproduce and raise young without the benefit of a social group.

Whether free ranging or feral domestic cats congregate in a group or not is essentially dependent on the food supply. Colonies will form around a "clumped" food source – such as a dairy farm, a garbage dump, or a place where a human caretaker has intervened and provides food. When cats are hunting prey to survive, they only come together to mate.

The result of that type of social structure is that cats have more communicative displays that serve to increase distance between individuals rather than decrease it. Certainly cats can adapt and even thrive on group living, but social communications designed to avoid conflict and enhance social bonds are not well developed.

This means many of the communicative displays we are all familiar with from dogs, aren't in the behavioral repertoire of cats. Cats don't show submission and they have no canine equivalent of a play bow. Friendly behaviors are also more subtle. "Tail up" seems to signal the cat is open to interaction with others, but for cats the most powerful expression of friendship may be just being close to each other. Allo-grooming (grooming of another individual) can also be an affiliative behavior, as it seems to occur most often between familiar cats, but grooming bouts can sometimes turn into conflicts.

Cats also don't have the social displays to easily "make up" or reconcile after conflicts do arise. Think about it – both play invitations and submissive displays are usually used to repair relationships – cats have neither. That's one reason why it's so important to introduce cats gradually rather than throwing them together and letting them "work it out" as you sometimes see recommended in the popular literature.

We've observed that individual cats – and even cats and dogs – seem to develop their own understanding of one another's communication signals as they become familiar with each other. For example we've encountered many cases in which a recently added, younger, more exuberant cat would pounce on an older resident cat in play but the older cat would initially interpret this behavior as threatening. Over time, as the cats became more familiar with another the older one learned the youngster's intent was not to harm and a friendly relationship would develop.

However, when these sorts of interactions occur too quickly in the relationship because the cats are put together too soon, the chances that the older cat does not adjust, threatens back, the younger cat gets annoyed and returns the threat become much greater.

The take home message is that introductions between unfamiliar cats must be 'micro-managed'. We have specific instructions in our DVD (CD version also available) "Helping Cats Co-Exist" in case you are

interested in the details of an introduction program. As BEN members, you get a 20% discount off regular price. You can find a link in BEN under Product Discounts in the top navigation.

5. “Beware of the Unexpected: Redirected Aggression”

We all know that redirected aggression refers to aggression that is directed at a target that did not initially elicit the behavior. Cats seem to be particularly prone to this behavior.

We often see this happen when a cat in the home sees a cat outside and becomes aggressively aroused. Unable to attack the outside cat, he (we’ve seen more males than females in these situations) turns and redirects his aggression to the next individual – other cat, person, or sometimes even the dog – he encounters.

For owners, it’s as though their cat attacked them “out of the blue”. When owners are not aware of the eliciting stimulus, it appears as though one cat attacked another for absolutely no reason. The victim cat may fight back or be so terrified she refuses to be anywhere near the attacker.

Being aware of these tendencies is important for anyone handling cats. When cats are brought to veterinary practices, grooming salons, boarding kennels, and shelters we should expect them to be exposed to situations that can trigger redirected aggression when they are next handled.

A cat in a carrier brought through a reception area filled with barking dogs could likely redirect aggression to a veterinary professional in the exam room. A cat that has been in a carrier, surrounded by other confined cats in an intake area in a shelter might be extremely aggressive when staff attempt to transfer him to a cage. Cats can also redirect aggression to family members after they return home from these experiences.

In our first Biscuit in the series we mentioned how redirected aggression can also be triggered by odors. If there is a cat in the home where you are working with the family’s dog, be aware of the potential for redirected aggression triggered by the odors you might bring in on your clothing or equipment bag.

If you are working with a cat-to-cat aggression case, in which cats that previously got along well together are suddenly in conflict, always consider a redirected event as the cause. We found most cases of cats fighting caused by redirected aggression respond well to re-introduction procedures and counter conditioning.

Aggression redirected to people can sometimes be quite intense and frightening for the person at the receiving end. Recommend that clients stay away from the cat, and not attempt to handle the animal. In some cases the cat may need to be confined to one room until it calms down and in order to keep the owner safe. In some cases the cats return to normal social interactions with their owners in just a few hours or days with minimal intervention. In other cases the cat continues to present a danger to the family and requires weeks of limited interaction, counter conditioning and in rare cases medication prescribed by a veterinarian to return to normal.

We hope you've enjoyed this Biscuit series on cat behavior. To find more compiled Biscuits on a variety of topics, just choose the Biscuit category on the right side bar after logging into BEN, and all the Biscuits will come up. There may be more than one page of posts so be sure to scroll to the bottom to check.