



Fifteen Ways To Avoid Cat Behavior Problems

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If a domestic cat is well socialised and healthy, cat behavior that we might consider a problem is probably natural behavior. If we try and correct it we will create a real cat behavior problem. Dealing with cat behavior problems, therefore, starts with understanding cat behavior and our behavior in relation to the cat. This page: [cat behavior](#) might help.



Contents

- [Think before starting](#)
- [Alter expectations](#)
- [Respect the cat](#)
- [Cats as individuals](#)
- [Have patience](#)
- [Never force a cat to do something](#)
- [Create an environment that is natural to a cat](#)
- [Don't declaw your cat](#)
- [Cat scratching is natural behavior](#)
- [Provide excellent litter box facilities](#)
- [Groom your cat](#)
- [Have an awareness of health and behavior](#)
- [Never punish a cat](#)
- [Aggressive cats](#)
- [True cat behavior disorders](#)

1: Think before starting

In cases where a strong human-cat bond fails to develop the cat is at risk of being abandoned. Clearly under these circumstances the human sees cat behavior more as a problem than a joy.

Research has identified "risk factors for a broken bond" leading to possible abandonment of the cat. Cats..

- acquired at no cost
- that are under the age of 6 months
- that were kept in basements or garages
- that were not neutered and
- had not been to a veterinarian were higher risk cats¹and naturally..
- ...when the cat caretaker reports cat behavior problems the risk of abandonment is intensified.



The strong inference from this research is that a good number of people acquiring a new cat do not, in all honesty, approach the matter with the correct commitment to giving enough time to caring for their cat in all its facets. They might also have unrealistic [expectations](#).

Therefore, before even considering adopting a cat, the correct mindset should be in place. Taking on a domestic cat should be for the life of a cat or our life. That might sound unrealistic or idealistic but I believe it is the opposite. We are after all talking about a future member of the family.

If we are unsure about our ability to care for a cat for the remainder of its life we should not proceed. That is better for us and the cat, ultimately. And it certainly avoids cat behavior problems because an incorrect mindset from us leads to certain problems.

What test can be applied when adopting a cat? Here are some pointers:

- selecting a kitten or cat for personality and disposition is more important than selecting for appearance. Good disposition and good health often go together. Well socialised cats from balanced parents will have a good disposition.
- select a kitten that is confident and eager for attention. When picked up the kitten should be relaxed. When stroked it should purr. Check if it likes to play. It should, and if startled it should quickly recover its composure. These are opposite traits to tenseness and shyness². People with experience of keeping cats should adopt the shy ones as they need homes too!

1. Risk factors for relinquishment of cats to an animal shelter by Patronek G.J. et al as referred to in The Cat, Its Behavior, Nutrition & Health by Linda P. Case page 106.

2. Cat Owner's Veterinary Handbook by Drs Carlson and Giffin - page 408.

2: Alter expectations!

Studies have shown that people with "specific and rigid expectations about the cat's behavior" were more likely to abandon their cat³. Conversely people who accepted their cat as a cat ([respect the cat](#)) were more likely to form strong bonds with the cat. For the former group of people, no doubt the cat did not behave in a way that met the person's ideas as to how a cat should behave. In short, for these people the cat had "behavior problems". In fact, the cat behaved normally and the human caretaker had misplaced ideas about cat behavior.

Let's think about it by taking a typical example. I live with a cat that likes to jump up onto the kitchen counter. You also live with a cat that likes to jump up onto the kitchen counter. I don't mind. You are concerned and see it as a cat behavior problem. I don't have a cat behavior problem. You do. You decide to accept it. You no longer have a cat problem. We both now expect our cat to behave like a cat and jump up onto a surface that to the cat is not out of bounds. Problem sorted. False expectations can create perceived cat behavior problems. If we are irritated and upset by our cat constantly doing something that we find unacceptable such as in the example above and punish our cat accordingly, it is likely to alienate our cat and make our cat defensive. Defensive, alienated cats are more likely to be aggressive towards their human companions for obvious reasons ([aggressive cats](#)). That will lead to further alienation and an eventual breakdown in the relationship. [Paragraph 13](#) gives some pointers on how to gently modify behavior.

Unrealistic expectations also relate to the amount of commitment required to properly care for a cat. As cat caretakers, our expectations are extremely important.



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3: Respect the cat

This might sound a little strange. What do I mean? As mentioned, cats are often treated as members of the family. Or they are adopted for that purpose. We talk to our cat and look to our cat for comfort ([Human-cat relationship](#)). This is one of the major reasons why we keep cats. We can all tend to think of our cat as a human child. This is alright provided that we remind ourselves that a cat will behave like a cat and more....a domestic cat has a lot of wild cat in his or her genes. If we respect the cat as a cat and

3. The Human-cat relationship by Karsh E.B. and Turner D.C. referred to The Cat, Its Behavior, Nutrition & Health by Linda P. Case page 107.

have the right [expectations](#)...we will undoubtedly avoid cat behavior problems. This is because we will not try and "shoe horn" our cat into behaving like a person. If we try and do that we can provoke cat behavior problems. We should give our cat the space to act as a cat, the place to act as a cat, and the love to be confident enough to express natural cat behavior.

*Another thing I'd say is respect the cat, don't force yourself on him when it's obvious he wants some 'private time' If he's peacefully sleeping, let him sleep. Talk to your cat, sing to him, make him feel important and loved and he will reward you a thousand times over with his love and trust in you. Get down on the floor with him and look at the world through his eyes, you can learn a lot that way. I heard this old saying many years ago and I think it's true: "If you can win a cat's friendship, you've something to boast about."...**Ruth***

*Don't force yourself on the cat! The flip side of this is, especially when dealing with a new cat, is let the cat come to you. Be nearby, be available, be aware of the cat (while seeming to ignore it!), but let the cat make the choice to engage you...**Valley Girl***

4: Cats as individuals

This is a point that we sometimes forget. Each cat is an individual. They have their own character. It is in our hands to recognize it and understand each cat's preferences, likes and dislikes. If we can get into this mindset, and into the minds of our cats, we are bound to end up living with a very contented cat because we will have truly learned to relate to a cat and form a loving bond. Under these circumstances a cat is very unlikely to present to us cat behavior problems.

*I also firmly believe that the bit of their face at the top of the nose, between their eyes that measures approximately an inch across is absolutely made just the right size for putting a kiss on, and this should be done at least once daily!...**Barbara***

5: Have patience

If you are adopting a cat for the first time have patience and consider going against the grain and adopting an older cat. Kittens can be more of a handful. An experienced older cat will usually know the ropes. In any event, give the cat at least 6 months to settle in and give yourself 6 months more to get used to looking after a cat. As mentioned, most cats that are relinquished are kept for relatively short periods (under 6 months). If you have the correct expectations and have created the correct environment have patience and things should improve if you felt uncertain at first.

But, patience works. As does responding to a small overture from a cat with something not too overwhelming for the cat. Example: cats often start out checking out a new human by "casually" walking past where the human is sitting (say). This walking back and forth can go on for a long time, and unless threatened, the cat will make the excursions closer and closer to the human as events progress. Good move (in my experience)- acknowledge the cat's presence verbally- "oh, there you are Ms. Cat, I'm glad to see you". Bad move (also my experience) grab the cat and try to foist it into your lap as soon as it's "walking back and forth" route gets within arms reach

*Also.. be consistent in your actions, and in the tone of voice you use for conveying different kinds of information. Cats do pay a lot of attention to this, I think....**Valley Girl***

6: Never force a cat to do something

Sounds obvious but we tend to try and do it, at least sometimes. We have our own pressures. We live in a slightly chaotic world where we like to try and take back some control over our lives and our cat refuses to come in or go somewhere...chill out. We adopted our cat to help us chill out anyway. This motto is linked to the first two. If we force a cat to do something against his or her will, we will more than likely get scratched or bitten and in any case we will always lose a battle with a cat. In addition, we will alienate our cat and we will call the cat's reaction a behavioral problem.

7: Create an environment that is natural to a cat

Well, it sounds like commonsense. But how many of us think about this? We naturally create an environment that feels as comfortable as possible for us. Is it comfortable for a domestic cat that is driven by the same genetic make up that drives and governs the behavior of the wild cats? There has to be compromise in the living arrangements if we are to live with a domestic cat in the same way that we compromise our decision making when living with a spouse.

We need to respect the cat's innate desires as best as we can; plenty of play areas and time to simulate the cat's natural desire to hunt is a good first step (particularly if the cat is a full-time indoor cat). Not being able to express natural drives



may cause the cat to engage in energy release behavior that we find disturbing. A typical reaction is compulsive self grooming. Other energy release behaviors might include:

- [eating houseplants](#). Cats need to [eat grass](#) from time to time.
- bringing in prey is natural. [Hunting is instinctive](#). Please accept this. Full-time indoor cats have little to hunt.
- Play-fighting is fairly common (e.g. [biting peoples ankles](#)). This is not aggression⁴.

Calm, a routine and a clean, pleasant, reassuring environment helps tremendously to avoid cat behavior problems. For multiple cat households, Susan says this:

Always praise your cat when you see good behavior. Pet him or her as much as possible. Always tell your cats how wonderful you think they are and how much you love them. If you have multiple cats, spend as much individual time with each cat. This will keep the fighting and other acting-out behaviors down to a minimum...Susan

8: Don't declaw your cat



Click this to go to a
Petition to
ban declawing

I am not saying this from the standpoint of ethical and moral grounds. God knows they are reason enough, more than enough. Declawing demonstrates a fundamental break down in the

relationship between human and cat and breaks [motto number 3](#). It is more than that. Although data is hard to come by because rescue centers are non-cooperative in providing it, declawed cats are more likely to be relinquished for cat behavior problems such as inappropriate elimination than intact cats. You want to avoid cat behavior problems? Don't declaw, please. Respect the cat as a cat, not as a fluffy creature.

9: Cat scratching is natural cat behavior

It is common knowledge that cat scratching furniture is one of the top three reasons for relinquishment of cats. The other two are [cat aggression](#) and [inappropriate elimination](#). There is not a lot to say about this that has not already been covered elsewhere in this e-Book, indirectly. Before adopting a cat we should have developed a mindset that says, "cats have claws. I accept that there may be some damage to furniture. I may get the odd scratch. I accept all that.." Voila, no cat behavior problem. In all honesty, if you categorically cannot cope with cat claws you should not keep a cat. That is the logical conclusion. Declawing cats can only be described as an abuse of the cat and it causes behavioral problems anyway. If you are in the middle ground of attitude towards claws,

4. Cat Owner's Home Veterinary Handbook by Drs Carlson DVM and Giffin MD - page 364-365.

dealing with them is commonsense. There are many articles on PoC that deal with this subject. Here are three:

- [Will my cat use a scratching post?](#)
- [My cat has claws and I love them](#)
- [Trim cat claws](#)

*You teach a cat as you teach a child, by kindness and distraction. Distract them from the behaviour that you find unacceptable and reward them when they learn. For example, after you've shown the cat how to use his **scratching post**, if he goes to scratch anywhere else (or anyone) don't say a word, simply lift him to his scratching post and praise him when he uses it. Cats are highly intelligent and soon learn what behaviour pleases you. All it takes is patience, kindness and a little bit of your time...**Ruth***

10: Provide excellent litter box facilities

I have already mentioned inappropriate elimination. It is the top cat behavioral problem. The problem can often be traced back to us one way or another, directly or indirectly. A good example would be [cat separation anxiety](#).

Litters should be spotless, [of the correct size](#) and cleaned once or twice daily. The positioning should be suitably quiet and where there is more than one cat, one litter per cat is the rule. If the same litter box is used for more than one cat, it is best to scrub the litter box in hot soapy water at least once a week, preferably more. A cat's urine is like its own ID card, and urine is used to mark a cat's territory. Some cats will smell that the other cat has used ('marked') the litter box and be discouraged to use it. They will do their 'business' in another litter box, or on the floor if there is no alternate litter box



A cat might prefer a certain type of litter in a certain place. It is up to us to discover it. Particularly for full-time indoor cats, our part of the deal is that we organize the litter to the cat's requirements if we are to live in harmony with our cat companion. Here is a list of possible explanations why a cat does not use the litter box (also [see this page](#)):

- cat dislikes litter box and/or litter and acquires a preference for an area outside it.
- cat dislikes where the litter box is.
- cat associates litter box with a bad experience (e.g. punishment or being chased).

- cat may have an emotional problem expressed in inappropriate elimination.

Particular steps that can be tried to treat litter box aversion:

- clean the litter box thoroughly and more frequently.
- use non deodorised litter.
- use litter that is additive free.
- try fine clay based grained litter.
- leave the box uncovered.
- increase the number of litter boxes.
- place new litter box where cat is soiling. If this works move it incrementally back to the site where you want it.
- ensure cat uses the litter in peace.
- make the site that is being used inappropriately a bad site for the cat by putting food there or playing there⁵.

Spraying is not urine elimination. Cats spray for territorial reasons by depositing scent to indicate their presence. Neutering curbs it. Susan Sullivan provides this advice:

*In order to keep this [spraying] from happening inside your house as much as possible, try to keep the number of house cats that you own down to a minimum, preferable only one cat. If you do have more than one cat, definitely have more than one litter box, preferable one for each cat, which kept in his or her favorite area of the house. Keep the box immaculate! There are also two products that can assist in keeping the urinating and spraying to a minimum, and they are Boundary and Nature's Miracle. They not only eliminate the odor to both your sense of smell as well as the cat's, but have a built-in repellent which discourages the cat from marking the area again..***Susan**

11: Groom your cat

Of course cats groom themselves beautifully. But in a natural world cats can carry fleas and other parasites. We have the chance to improve on their health. In fact we owe an obligation to do our best for their health. I know we are busy and distracted all the time and lulled into the cosy belief that cats look after themselves. They do, but we can improve things and it is for our benefit too. Grooming our cat allows for an intimate exchange. It benefits us and lets us inspect and check for parasites and other readily apparent and unwanted conditions while reinforcing the bond between cat and human. This can only have positive repercussions.

12: Have an awareness of health and behavior

We should be observant about our cat and not shirk our responsibilities to take our cat to the veterinarian when demanded. I know vets are expensive, sometimes too expensive. This puts us off. But delay exacerbates any health problem and health problems affect behavior. We should acquaint ourselves with basic health issues and expected behavior. This allows us to recognize problems early. Proactive measures keep the relationship in balance and avoids cat behavior problems.

13: Never punish a cat

There is quite a lot of advice on the internet about how to stop cats misbehaving through punishment. As I have implied, cats don't misbehave they act naturally in response to what is before them. Cats do not understand the concept of punishment. It is a human concept and therefore it is inappropriate to apply it to a cat. We are meant to be smarter than a cat. Let's use our intelligence to encourage a cat to do what we wish, provided it is natural for the cat. Positive reinforcement and reward comes to mind. Punishment, which is the opposite, is almost certain to create cat behavior problems and it will alienate a cat. [Please don't punish your cat.](#)

As you know, the one thing that is really important to me is respect, people need to respect a cat as a cat. A cat is not a person, they don't think like a person, they don't behave like a person, and they often don't understand why people behave in certain ways towards them. If a cat is playing with you and they bite you and then you hit them, the cat won't understand why you did that, as far as the cat's concerned you're punishing it for playing, that's how cats play, biting and scratching is involved, so when you think about it, are you teaching the cat a lesson, or are you causing it to lack trust in you and brake down any bond that is there, because from the cat's point of view, you seem to lash out at it when it's having fun and behaving in a healthy cat-like manner. Therefore, you are not respecting the cat and its typical cat behaviour

*The idea of physical discipline is to inflict pain on the cat in order to deter the cat from doing a certain thing. Yes, it does get results, because it hurts and scares the cat so much that it is frightened of doing that due to the fact that it knows it will have some sort of pain inflicted on it. That's no way to teach a cat the wrongs and rights. The infliction of pain, purposely, is also the meaning of cruelty, which is why it is wrong to physically discipline a cat..**Maggie***

In my opinion and experience (36 years of happy well behaved cats of [my] own), the most important thing is that cats should never ever be

*punished. They don't understand punishment as what they do is natural behaviour for them. They need to be taught like children but we always need to bear in mind they are not children, they are cats and they like being cats...**Ruth***

*Maggie mentions the stern "No!" and it's usually enough for stopping unwanted behaviour. If not, move the cat, but never in an unkind way. Once it has stopped, do remember to talk calmly to the cat so that it knows you are not mad at it. I really can't emphasize the importance of talking to your cat enough. Even if it feels a bit silly at first, talk to your cat. Even if the cat doesn't understand a word of it, it helps bonding so much - and also makes yourself feel better. ;-)..**Finn***

14: Aggressive cats

What we perceive as aggression in a cat is one of the top cat behavior problems. A lot is written about it from the standpoint of, "what can we do to the cat to change things?" This is jumping the gun as we need to isolate the underlying reason, first. Cats will become aggressive, like us, if provoked. What provokes a cat is different to what provokes us.

Also what seems like aggression towards us, is not. I have mentioned play fighting [above](#). Provided the cat is properly socialized, aggression in cats is usually defensive behavior (self-protection). We create the environment. If a cat feels threatened it is our responsibility to find the solution.

However, if a cat is not socialised (also our responsibility usually) the cat will struggle to feel relaxed in human company and tend towards defensive and perhaps, therefore, aggressive behavior. I mentioned this in the [first section](#). I discuss all the aggressive cat problems and how to avoid them on this page: [Aggressive Cat Behavior](#). Photo by Purrs & Paws of A.R.A.S.

15: True cat behavior disorders

True cat disorders are usually associated with medical conditions. Cats are solitary and independent. They like routine and, as mentioned, not to be forced to do things. They can become frustrated if they cannot express their innate drives and/or are disturbed by a change in living arrangements. Cat behavior is also based on:

- degree of socialisation
- inherited characteristics
- [health](#) - example: inappropriate elimination can be caused by a urinary tract infection.
- [age](#)

- [sex](#) of the cat

True cat behavior disorders include eating disorders; rarely, anorexia nervosa affects cats. There will be an underlying medical problem such as nervous stress and insecurity. A vet is needed. Overeating causing [obesity](#) is more common. The cause is taste gratification (comfort eating) possibly due to boredom and lack of exercise or competition with other cats eating together. One solution in part is to feed less palatable food. Abnormal sucking behavior is also due to a form of mental illness - being weaned too early or being nutritional deprived as a kitten. The solution? I know of none but some vets suggest drugs.

What I call true cat behavior disorders relatively rare. A visit to the veterinarian is the usual answer.
