



Behavior Modification Handout

Destructive Scratching

Cats scratch things for many reasons: they are marking their territory for fun and entertainment, to stretch and exercise, and they may also be removing old claw tissue. First thing to come to terms with is realistic expectations. It is unreasonable to expect this behavior to not exist. Cats are going to scratch and we need to provide appropriate outlets for them to express and experience this natural and instinctual behavior.

Starting Off on the Right Paw / Managing Your Environment

Always have plenty of acceptable scratching areas for your cat with a variety of surfaces and textures. Scratching posts should be sturdy enough not to wobble or tip over. They can also be scented with catnip to make them more appealing. Most cats will need a little training to encourage them to scratch the items you provide. Try to pick textures and surfaces your cat has already shown a preference for, and place them in areas that your cat will spend most of his time. If you place one small scratching post in a spare bedroom away from the household's everyday activities, your cat is not likely to make a habit out of using it. This is one of those situations where more is better! Praising and offering food treats will positively reinforce your cat for scratching in the right places. Put treats on the cat tree or scratching posts to entice and reward your cat for going to those areas.

Correcting Mistakes

Your cat is going to make occasional mistakes, and redirecting him to an appropriate scratching area will be an effective part of your behavior modification plan. If you see him scratching the sofa or any other "off limits" item, interrupt the behavior with a loud clap of your hands or a loud HEY! Your interruption should be just loud enough to stop the behavior, but not so loud as to scare or frighten your pet. Then redirect him to an appropriate scratching item, such as his cat tree or scratching post. Always verbally praise and offer small food treats as positive reinforcement if and when your cat scratches appropriately. Punishing your cat for scratching inappropriately will not correct the problem behavior and may even make your cat afraid of you. Using redirection and rewarding your cat for desirable behavior will be more enjoyable and less frustrating for you and your cat and help to preserve your emotional bond.

Avoiding the Pitfalls

Set your cat up for success! If your pet is having a difficult time kicking the habit (destructive scratching is self-rewarding, it feels good, and therefore becomes a strong learned behavior very quickly), you may need to use aversives as part of your behavior modification plan. An aversive is something your cat will not like or that will make the desired scratching area less appealing. • Covering an area (such as the arm of your couch) with aluminum foil, double-sided sticky tape or sand paper

- Spraying the area with a strong scent such as Listerine or a barrier spray
- Covering an area with a carpet runner that is turned upside down (so the bumpy side is out)

It is important to remember that an aversive is a type of remote punishment and should only be used as a last resort and only in unison with a behavior modification plan. An aversive alone will not solve a destructive scratching problem. For more information please see our “Exercise” handout. Providing appropriate exercise is a very important part of dealing with certain behavior problems.

Tips and Hints

- Keeping your cat’s nails cut short will ensure that less damage is done if your cat makes a mistake.
- Try “Soft Paws.” This is a product that fits over your cat’s own nails. You will need to see your vet to learn how to use this product.
- Remember, patience! It may take some time for your cat to get used to scratching his stuff and not yours.
- We do not recommend declawing your cat as a solution to destructive scratching. This procedure may even cause other behavior problems to develop.