



## Behavior Modification Handout

### **Multi-Cat Households**

Managing a multi-cat household can be a challenge and the more cats you have in an average size living environment the more difficult it may be. Cats have a need for a surprisingly large area of living space in order to be mentally and emotionally content. Common problems with multiple cats may be aggression between cats, not using the litter box or a pet that is fearful and constantly hiding.

### **Starting Off on the Right Paw / Managing Your Environment**

Dividing the real estate in your home will be very important in managing your cat's environment. Each one of your pets should have his own feeding area, resting area, toys and litter box. If your cat does not have to share his resources he will be less likely to become territorial. Some cats are naturally more territorial than others and predicting which cats or how many cats will get along with each other is impossible.

Taking your time when introducing a new pet is critical. You should never force cats in your household to interact with each other. Let them proceed at their own pace. A spare bedroom or family room that can be closed off will work great as a safe place for your pet if they have to be separated temporarily. Successful acclimation can sometimes take weeks and even months. Providing an interactive and entertaining environment for your cat will help to decrease boredom and stimulate exercise. Cats that are mentally and physically satisfied will feel less compelled to search for entertainment and you will find that they are getting into less trouble.

### **Correcting Mistakes**

If you have cats that are fighting on a regular basis the most important thing is to manage the environment in order to eliminate the fights.

The social structure of cats will fluctuate and stable hierarchies are not formed like with dogs. Fights that are allowed to continue will only get worse. Cats that fight learn this behavior and will use it more quickly in order to deal with conflicts. Don't let it become a habit! Your pets should not be left to "work it out on their own." Separating cats into different areas of the house while working on modifying the behavior will be helpful. This will lower the level of tension and help your pets feel safer and less threatened. Several hours to several days of separation may be necessary depending on the severity of the aggression between cats. Slow and gradual exposure and re-introductions are

needed when attempting to bring cats back together in the same area. Positive reinforcement with food treats and verbal praise when cats are interacting appropriately will help to make it a pleasant and less frightening experience. You should never force any physical contact let them get reacquainted at their own pace. Cats that have a history of fighting with each other may never become best friends, and may just tolerate each other. Some highly territorial cats may do better as the only cat in the household.

### **Avoiding the Pitfalls**

You should never punish your cats for fighting or use punishment to interrupt aggressive behaviors. Punishment in most cases will only elicit an increase in aggression or fear and you may become the indirect target of a bite or a scratch. Redirecting your cat when you see one of them targeting another cat in the house (stalking) and get his attention focused on something else, such as a favorite toy or a food treat. Learn your cat's body language and try to anticipate when aggression may develop between your pets. Avoid activities that may trigger aggressive responses in your pets. It may take some detective work to uncover your pet's sensitivities and to discover what is most likely to trigger an event.

Stopping fights before they get started will help to decompress tension in a household where cats are not getting along. If a fight is already begun it is important to interrupt it as soon as possible. Use a loud clap of your hands or a loud "HEY". Often cats that are in fight response are difficult to separate you may need to have a spray bottle of water or a can of compressed air to use as an interruption by spraying them. Do not attempt to pick up or separate your cats with your hands or feet this could easily result in an injury to yourself. Once separated your cats should be isolated from each other in order to calm them down. It may take sometime for your pet's mental and physical state to return to normal so be patient and do not rush to put them back together until you are certain immediate fighting will not reoccur.

### **Tips and Hints**

There are a lot of variables that determine whether cats in your house will be friends or foes many of them not fully understood even by the most experienced professionals.

Socialization does play a big role; kittens that have been exposed to other cats at an early age or come from friendly parents are more likely to be tolerant or friendly towards other cats.

- Considering a trip to your vet for extreme cases may be helpful. Your vet may be able to provide medication to help your cat thru the training and behavior modification period. It is also important to ensure your cat's issues are not related to any medical condition prior to starting a behavior modification plan.
- Spaying and neutering your pets is important in creating a well balanced multi-cat household. Just one intact member may cause problems in the entire group.

- Establishing predictable routines in the household and eliminating or minimizing stressful events, (such as planning a big party or having company stay over) during training and behavior modification periods will make learning easier for your pet and positive results more attainable.