



Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

DOMESTIC FELINE BEHAVIOR

Domestic cats are more like their wild counterparts than any other companion animal species!

Nocturnal Behavior

Imagine you are a wild animal that must hunt and compete for all of your food while avoiding being eaten by another predator at the same time. How would you hunt and stay safe at the same time? By hunting at night! Felines are nocturnal animals, which means they are more active at night. Wild cats adapted this behavior in order to survive and our pet cats behave the same way. Your pet cat may vocalize, “hunt”, and play more at night, while she snoozes on the couch during the day. This can present a problem for many cat owners who would prefer a quiet home for sleeping during the night. If you want to teach your kitty that night time is for sleeping, get your cat on a schedule where she must be more active during the day. This means you should play with her a lot during the day so that she burns her energy and is tired at night. It is also important to provide entertainment for your cat at night. A bored kitty will vocalize more and try to elicit play from you. Provide toys for her to play with and set them up in a room other than your bedroom.

Play Behavior

When our cats play, the behaviors they display are actually modified predatory behaviors. Have you ever watched you cat play? When cats play they pounce, leap, stalk, ambush, attack, bite, shake, and capture things with their paws. These are all behaviors cats display when they are hunting prey. It is important for kittens and cats to play like this because it increases coordination and is mentally stimulating for your pet. However, this type of play can lead to bites and scratches on your body. If you’re wondering how to allow your cat to play like this without her injuring members of your family then I have the answer for you! Get appropriate cat toys and play with your cat every day. There are many cat toys available at your local pet stores. Look for toys that allow your cat to stalk, ambush, and attack. Examples of these toys include the “cat fishing poles” with feathers or a toy on the end of the line or similar toys. Avoid toys that encourage your cat to attack or swat various parts of your body such as the gloves with extra long fingers for cat owners to wear.

Elimination Preferences

Cats can be very picky when it comes to elimination preferences. If you want to encourage success with your cat and the litterbox there are a few suggestions you should follow. First, know that cats like to eliminate on soft textures. This is why many cats that stop using their litterbox choose to eliminate on piles of laundry, carpet, or your bed. You want to use a soft cat litter. The best type of litter to encourage litterbox success is

fine grained scoopable clay litter. Hopefully, we all know that cats prefer a clean litterbox. This means the litter should be scooped daily and changed at least once per week. Avoid cat litter that has a strong odor. What smells good to us may be overwhelming to our cats. Also, many people put too much litter in the box. The cat litter should be one inch or less in depth. If you have multiple cats in your house then you should have multiple boxes. A general rule is one box per cat and at least one box per level of your house.

Scratching Behavior

Why do cats scratch things? They do this for many reasons. Cats shed their nails frequently. The sheath of the old nail will come off to reveal a new, healthy nail underneath. Cats need to scratch to facilitate the removal of the old nail. If they are unable to scratch your cat may be forced to chew them off, which could lead to severe injury to the cat's feet. Cats also like to mark their territory and they do this both visually and with scent. When a cat scratches something in the wild, such as a tree trunk, they are able to mark visibly by displaying scratch marks on the base of the tree, but cats also have scent glands on their paws. When a cat scratches on something, he is able to leave his scent behind for others to smell. Finally, cats scratch in order to exercise and stretch the muscles in their necks and backs. If you want to encourage your cat to scratch on appropriate items it is important to be aware of what he likes to scratch. Does he scratch on vertical or horizontal surfaces? Does he prefer carpet or wood. Provide a scratching post or mat that matches his scratching preferences. If your cat already has a destructive scratching problem, declawing is not the answer. If you declaw a cat you take away an important warning signal. Many declawed cats are more prone to spontaneous biting since they do not have another way to say "back off." Make the items he is scratching unappealing to the cat by placing self-adhesive counter paper or double sided sticky tape on it. Cats do not want to scratch on slick surfaces such as plastic.

If you have any questions regarding cat behavior or any behavior related question please contact the Houston SPCA Animal Behavior Department at 713-869-7722, extension 187. We have animal behavior specialists available to answer questions, provide private consultations, or group training classes. You can also email our behaviorists at animals@hspca.org.