



Just Say No! Cats and the Crime of Punishment

Is Felix being naughty? Are your punishment techniques unsuccessful at getting results? A new approach to “bad behavior” may help you change how you look at your cat and find solutions.

There are often times when we may find ourselves at wits end with our cat. However, most behaviors that cats are punished for are actually normal feline behaviors – they just may not be what we humans consider acceptable. With that in mind, it is important to recognize that these normal behaviors may need accommodation, and with simple behavior modification techniques, the “problem” may go away.

Unfortunately, there is a lot of outdated or just plain inaccurate information about punishing cats available. Whether you heard it from your veterinarian, your friend or the internet, we’re here to tell you that all types of physical punishment are not only detrimental to your relationship with your cat, but they JUST DON’T WORK. This includes spanking, pushing, scruffing and pinning down, swatting with newspaper or other objects, and the popular choice for many people – nose tapping. Many people think that nose tapping is a harmless way to correct a cat. If you think of the size difference between your finger and a cat’s nose, you will notice that it is equivalent to a human being “tapped” on the nose with a rolling pin...which most of us would agree doesn’t sound like a pleasant experience. Physical punishment has many negative effects on your relationship with your cat. The first thing you may notice is that your cat starts to cower whenever you approach it with your hands. For fearful cats, this will only reinforce their fear of humans.

The other thing that happens is that punishment can turn a sweet cat into an aggressive one. If you swat or spank your cat, he may feel that you are “escalating” the situation or provoking it to fight. Many cats respond to a nose-tap with a bite or swat – not exactly the response you may have been expecting...especially if you were looking for guilt or remorse.

Cats have a fairly limited concept of punishment. Many people assume that their cat “knows” it is being bad, because it does something wrong, such as scratching the furniture, and then skulks away. In fact, the cat is just associating the presence of its owner with being yelled at. He is not recognizing that scratching the couch is bad – again, to your kitty, scratching is a normal behavior (that also happens to feel good, and that may be reward enough to risk being yelled at).

Many cats engage in problematic behaviors out of boredom. Just as with children, they may see “negative” attention (such as being yelled at) better than no attention at all. Often, in the case of a very bored cat who isn’t getting enough mental stimulation, humans actually **reward** negative behaviors by



shouting. In this situation, the cat is looking for some sort of response from the human – that reaction is frequently enough of a reward that the cat will knock things off your dresser or scratch your furniture, even if he knows he may get in trouble for it.

So, do we just give up and let the cats do whatever they want? The answer is an unequivocal, no. But, there are ways to “correct” bad behavior that are much more effective than yelling or hitting your cat. Cats learn by trial and error. If they try something and have a good experience, they will do it again. If they try something and have a *bad* experience, the behavior is more likely to be extinguished – although not always immediately. Sometimes they will keep trying in hopes that the good experience will return – just as humans will play the slot machines time and time again, hoping for the “big payoff” – before finally giving up.

A four step plan (we’ll call it **PURR**) to encourage your cat to be well-behaved looks like this:

1. **P**revention: Give your cat an appropriate outlet for “normal” feline behaviors
2. **U**se correction, but *only when appropriate*
3. use **R**emote punishment to discourage undesirable behaviors
4. **R**eward to reinforce good behaviors

Now we’re going to look at the most common reasons cats are punished, and new, improved ways to solve these problems!

Litterbox Problems

Housoiling (aka litterbox problems, inappropriate elimination) is not only the number one reason cats are punished, but the number one reason that cats are relinquished to and euthanized in animal shelters. Unfortunately, most people do not understand why their cat would urinate or defecate outside the litterbox. For more information on this, we recommend that you read our **Litterbox Basics** handout.

Your four step plan would look like this:

1. Make sure the litterbox is suitable to the cat; also have your cat thoroughly checked for any medical problems that might contribute to this behavior; address any boredom or stress your cat is experiencing.
2. Punishment or correction are NEVER appropriate with housoiling problems. A dirty or otherwise unacceptable box, medical problems or stress are almost always the cause for housoiling. Punishment does not address any of these three situations, and will definitely increase stress. “Showing” your cat its “mess” will not make him understand that you are angry about *where* he eliminated. In his mind, for some reason, the act of eliminating itself has become a punishable offense. This will cause an incredible amount of stress every time he has to urinate or defecate, as he anticipates an angry response to his physical need. This often leads



- cats to find more covert, secretive places for eliminating, making it even harder for cat guardians to keep track of, until the problem is severe.
3. You can make soiled areas unappealing to your cat by changing the surface (such as with tin foil)
 4. You can praise your kitty with a gentle, quiet voice when they do use the litterbox, but don't overdo it!

Scratching Furniture

The most common cause of furniture scratching is a lack of an appropriate scratching post. Since the couch fulfills most of the cats scratching needs (tall, sturdy, a material they like to scratch, and in an easily accessible location), it seems like the best place to sharpen those claws.

To work with this behavior:

1. Give your cat an adequate scratching post. Scratching is a natural behavior, and necessary for all cats – it's how they stretch, mark their territory, relieve stress and shed their claws.
2. Correction or punishment, such as yelling or squirting with a water bottle, is not appropriate in this case. Cats learn quickly that the punishment only happens when humans are around, and will just return to scratching furniture when you leave. They may also scratch furniture, anticipating some attention (remember, to a bored cat, negative attention may be better than no attention at all).
3. Make the furniture an unappealing place to scratch by using tin-foil, double sided tape, or a product called Sticky Paws. These are all unpleasant sensations for a kitty trying to scratch.
4. Encourage your cat to use the scratching post by using treats, toys or catnip to lure them into a natural stretching position. Praise them for using their post instead of the couch.

You can also read our "**Paws and Claws**" handout for more information on training cats to use a scratching post.

Climbing on Furniture/Knocking Over Items

Cats love to be up high. They also need lots of mental stimulation. When they don't have outlets for these needs, they may start climbing up on your dresser, kitchen table or counters. In a playful mode, they may start batting at small objects, trying to knock them off. Not only does this provide them with some playful activity, but they may get a response from their human out of it, as well.

1. Start by giving your kitty its own cat condo or high-up places to hang out (you can clear off some shelves and put fleece pads on them to make them more appealing. More interactive playtime with toys such as the cat dancer or feather wand, in addition to solo play toys (ping pong balls, fuzzy mice) will provide more mental stimulation.
2. As in the case of other attention seeking behaviors, punishment is not effective for this behavior, and may just reinforce it.



3. Make counters and other surfaces unappealing – you can use cookie sheets or pieces of cardboard with tin foil or double sided tape attached to them. You can also “booby-trap” the area with empty soda cans with a few pennies taped inside – when the cat jumps up on the counter, the noise of the cans being knocked over will be a deterrent. Keep in mind, this deterrent is not a good idea with shy cats or in multi-cat households where a non-guilty kitty may be scared off by the punishment.
4. Praise the kitty for using its cat tree, and make it a fun place to be – try placing some catnip, or solo play toys on the cat tree. Try incorporating the kitty condo into your interactive playtime – get your cat climbing or jumping on it to chase a toy.

Begging for Food

Unfortunately, many people encourage begging for food by hand feeding their cats, or allowing them to sit on the dinner table while they eat. Once this behavior is started, it can be hard to stop.

1. Prevent this behavior by always feeding your cat from his food dish. Feeding your cat on a strict schedule will help him get used to a routine of eating when *his* food is available, not when any food is available. Do not feed him table scraps, on the dinner table or while you are eating.
2. As in the case of other attention seeking behaviors, punishment is not effective for this behavior, and may just reinforce it.
3. Use the methods described above to keep cats off counters and tables.
4. If you feed your cat on a schedule, they will perceive their meals as a reward, and the behavior will be “self-reinforcing” – they get their food and treats in the appropriate location.

Biting

Cats often bite and scratch due to a lack of play-time (known as “Predatory Aggression”), because they have been taught to bite by humans (by being encouraged to chase wiggling fingers, or being wrestled with) ” or irritation from too much handling (“overstimulation”).

1. Give the cat appropriate outlets for playful behavior: plenty of interactive playtime and solo play toys. Never encourage your cat to play with human body parts. When petting your cat, watch for signs of irritation such as a tail swish, head turn, dilated pupils or cranky meow and give breaks from handling.
2. This is one case where correction is appropriate. However, you want to use the least amount of stimulus needed to interrupt the bad behavior. This means starting very minimally and increasing corrective measures slowly. The corrective stimulus should not be so much as to scare the cat; then you have defeated your purpose and contributed to the beginning of a new problem - fear of people. Use only humane correction: saying NO or OUCH (loudly if necessary), clapping your hands, or blowing air on



- the cat's face as it bites. Back away from the cat slowly and quietly. Then withdraw attention, giving the kitty a "time-out" for 10-15 seconds.
3. Remote punishment is not necessary in this case.
 4. Encourage "good" playful behavior by rotating toys and making playtime a regular, routine event that you and your cat can look forward to.

We also have handouts available on **Excessive Meowing, Fabric Eating, Separation Anxiety, Attention Seeking Behaviors,** and **Nighttime Naughties ...** contact us if you would like to receive them!

Now that you have a better understanding of **why** your kitty misbehaves, and how to encourage good behavior, you and your kitty can both be **PURR**ing in no time!

If you have further questions, please phone the SF/SPCA Cat Behavior Helpline at (415) 554-3075 or email catbehavior@sfpca.org