BEHAVIOR SERIES

Using Aversives to Modify Your Cat's Behavior

WE'RE ALL FAMILIAR WITH the impact that curiosity can have on a cat's life expectancy, but a cat's penchant for nosing around can be pretty upsetting to his caregivers as well. That's why some cat owners seek to deter their felines from doing certain things through the use of "aversives." Aversives are tools and techniques used to keep cats away from particular places or to stop them from engaging in undesirable behaviors.

Establishing an effective aversive stimulus to prevent various antics is often a case of trial and error, as individual reactions will vary with each cat. But don't forget that even after you've found the best method to discourage a cat from a particular action or place, the approach will seldom work effectively unless you offer a *positive* alternative that is both convenient and rewarding.

What are some typical aversives used by cat caregivers? Here's a rundown of some common deterrents, each of which will have varying degrees of success depending on the objective and the cat.

Textures

One way to keep your cat away from certain areas is to surround (or cover) the area with materials that make your cat's paws uncomfortable. Try shelf paper (sticky side up) or double-sided carpet tape. Heavy plastic carpet runner (pointed side up) can also be used effectively in some situations.

You may need to weight the material firmly or tape it down to ensure it stays put. To protect furniture or floor finishes from sticky substances, attach the aversive to a piece of foil or heavy plastic and secure that with weights or light tape.

Smells

Because cats are often attracted or repelled by certain scents, you can set boundaries by soaking cotton balls, rags, or washcloths in a "stinky" substance that is not harmful to cats. To help protect carpets, upholstery, floors, or furniture, place the saturated object on a piece of weighted foil or heavy plastic. To prevent the substance from seeping into the ground, use the same precautions. Some of the most effective substances to apply include the following:

- Citrus odors—such as concentrated juices or fresh peels
- Colognes
- Some muscle rubs (*NOTE: Some cats react to menthol as they do to catnip—beware!*)
- Aloe gel

Tastes

Just as certain odors will discourage cats from visiting places where you don't want them, certain displeasing tastes will keep them from returning. Some of the following substances may damage furniture or floor

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finishes, however, so be sure to test them in a hidden location before widespread use.

- Bitter Apple® or similar sprays and gels marketed specifically for pet taste aversion
- Some muscle rubs
- Citrus, such as from concentrated juices or fresh peels
- Aloe gel

Human-Controlled Aversives

Some items can be used to distract your cat and thereby interrupt his unwanted behavior. Such devices are not meant to terrify your cat, but to provide a brief distraction. It's best if your cat does not perceive the distraction as coming from you. In the instant your cat's attention is focused on the distracting action, redirect his behavior to an appropriate object, and then give him lots of praise. Some effective aversives that you control include:

- Spray bottle or squirt gun filled with water or a combination of water and vinegar (*NOTE: Avoid high-powered water guns that have a very forceful spray*)
- Loud air horn
- Whistle
- Shaker can (soda can filled with nails, pennies, beans, or pebbles—then securely taped shut)

Surprise! Remote Aversives

Sometimes the best approach for teaching an animal is to work from a distance. If every aversive is delivered when you're in the room, your cat may quickly learn, for example, to jump on the coffee table only when you're not around. A few good approaches include:

- Motion detectors that react with a startling sound
- Snappy trainer (an upside-down mouse trap that's securely taped under paper to avoid injury)
- Aluminum pie plate containing water, beans, or pebbles—preferably balanced precariously on a counter or other undesirable "jumping" surface so that it will fall off when your cat jumps up
- ScatMat® (which delivers a very slight electrical shock)

When using aversives, remember that they offer the advantage of modifying certain feline behaviors in ways that distance the "correction" from you, the caregiver. Experiment with different types of aversives and try to match the aversive to the cat. For example, using a surprise technique on a cat who tends to be fearful should be a last resort.

Above all, be patient and give your feline frequent play sessions and attention as well as appropriate objects for him to scratch, claw, and climb. That way, your cat's antics will amuse you instead of annoy you, and the special bond between both of you will continue to grow.

Adapted from material originally developed by applied animal behaviorists at the Dumb Friends League, Denver, Colorado.
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