



Coorrecting Unwanted Behavior in Your Cat

Kelley Bollen, MS, CABC, Director of Behavior Programs, Maddie's Shelter Medicine Program, Cornell University

Sometimes cats do things we don't like such as jumping up on the table or counters, scratching on the furniture, or attacking our feet when we walk by. The first thing we need to learn before we try to "correct" these annoying behaviors is that they are all motivated by natural feline instincts. Cats naturally seek out high places to rest and survey their environment, so you should provide them with several high perches around the house. Cats also naturally scratch on vertical surfaces to mark their territory, so you should provide a proper scratching post and encourage them to use it. And cats love to play, and their play behavior often involves aspects of the hunt — and sometimes the only available prey is a pair of moving feet. Provide your cat with plenty of toys and spend some time everyday throwing a ball or crumpled up piece of paper for your cat to chase.

Redirecting your cat to perform these natural behaviors where and when you feel is appropriate is the best way to deal with these problems. However, sometimes you may also need to let your cat know that the old place or action is not acceptable. The worst way to try to correct unwanted behavior is to physically or verbally punish your cat. All this does is make your cat afraid of you and teach her that it's only safe to do these things when you aren't around.

A better way to correct a cat is to have the environment do the punishing. We call this remote correction and it is very effective because an animals' behavior is dictated by the consequences that follow. If doing a certain thing leads to an unpleasant experience then your cat will be less likely to do it again. Using remote correction has the added benefit of removing you as the bad guy.

The idea is to connect something unpleasant with the behavior you are trying to get rid of. Aversive textures, smells, tastes, or sounds can be used to "booby trap" off-limit areas or interrupt unwanted behaviors. The following are some examples of each:

Textures: sticky paper, aluminum foil, heavy plastic, or a plastic carpet runner (knobby side up) can be placed in areas you want to be off limits. Cats hate walking on these surfaces.

Smells: citronella, perfumes, solid air fresheners, citrus, aloe, eucalyptus oil, and oil of wintergreen are all aversive smells to cats. Soak pieces of cloth or cotton balls in these smelly substances and place them where you don't want your cat to go.

Tastes: bitter apple, citrus products, hot sauces, cayenne pepper or aloe gel can all be rubbed on the surface your cat is chewing on. They will associate the bad taste with the item.

Sound: blow a whistle, ring a bell, or shake a penny can (empty soda can with 5-6 pennies inside) to startle her just as she is about to engage in the unwanted behavior. Remember, you should not say a word - the startling noise should come out of nowhere. A strategically placed motion detector, a pyramid of empty soda cans that fall when disturbed, or a mousetrap inside a paper bag are options for when you are not around. These events are designed to simply startle your cat, not terrify her, but this may not be the best method if you have a particularly sensitive cat.

The key to owning a wonderful pet is to reinforce behaviors you like. Don't forget to tell kitty how good she is when she is sleeping in an acceptable place, scratching on the scratching post, or playing with the appropriate toy.