



# HUMANE SOCIETY OF BROWARD COUNTY

## Behavior Modification Handout

### Dealing With Litter Box Problems

Litter box problems can be very frustrating for you and your cat. In order to resolve a problem, it is important to determine the possible reasons your cat is experiencing a break-down in his normal, appropriate litter box routine. Some common reasons that cats will stop using their litter box may be that the box and litter are not clean enough, they experience a traumatic event while in the box (stress or fear), a change in household routine, medical problems, and location of the box or substrate preference. Any one or combination of these issues could be the cause of a litter box problem. Once the cause or causes are identified, you can start to make a difference in your pet's life with management, medical treatment or behavior modification.

#### GETTING STARTED

- **Veterinarian Exam.** – A good place to start is scheduling a check-up for your pet with your vet. Often when a cat has a urinary tract infection or other urinary problem, they will change their litter box routine or stop using it altogether. It is important to inform your vet of the litter box problem in order for the appropriate testing to be administered and to have an accurate diagnosis determined.
- **Stress Evaluation.** – Cats are very sensitive to changes in their environment and something as simple as moving the furniture around, getting new carpet or having company stay over could cause enough stress in your pet to interrupt his litter box routine.
- **Substrate Preference.** – Most cats will pick a litter or substrate that they like. Once you find what works, avoid trying new or different types. Stay away from heavily perfumed litters or fancy pearl-type litter. The majority of cats will do well with a good brand name scoopable litter like “Tidy Cat” or an unscented litter.
- **Type of Box.** – There are many different styles of litter boxes. Keep in mind “user friendly.” Make sure the box is an appropriate size (not too big and not too small). Box types can be covered or uncovered, and if your cat is not using one, offer the other. My all-time favorite for potential problems is the automatic self-cleaning motorized litter box. Your cat will inevitably walk by one day while the box is in cleaning mode and probably think to himself, “Wow, that was scary! Boy, am I glad I was not in there when that thing went off!”
- **Location, Location, Location.** – Not just important in real estate! The box should be somewhere private and quiet, but not too isolated from the rest of the house. A good thing to remember is easy-in and easy-out. Avoid putting the box where your cat could be ambushed by kids or other pets. Also remember that sound and other stimulus is important to consider. A lot of owners put the box in the laundry room next to the dryer, and what happens when the drying cycle is over? An alarm or buzzer will go off, and if the cat happens to be using the box when that happens, guess what? The cat stops using the box. Be aware and sensitive to what is going on in and around the house when choosing the right spot for the box.
- **A Clean Box is Best.** – Cats are very particular about a clean box, and often problems start because the box is too dirty. The box should be scooped every day and emptied and cleaned out with a mild soap and water once a week. Some scoopable litters will recommend using their brand for up to a month and just topping off the litter after scooping. This recommended cleaning schedule is rarely enough. Stick to cleaning the box completely every week. When refilling the box, don't overdo it. Most cats do not want to sink in up to their elbows in litter – about 1 ½ to 2 inches of litter is plenty.

- **When One is Not Enough.** – If your cat is having problems, additional boxes may be needed. The general rule of thumb is one box per cat, plus one. So if you have three cats, you should have four litter boxes. Keep in mind that some cats prefer to urinate in one box and defecate in another; so if you only have one cat, you may still need two litter boxes. Boxes should be in different locations, not just lined up next to each other. Cats need their own separate resources and the litter box is one of your cat's most important resources. Other resources, such as food, toys and resting areas should be kept separate from the litter box area. Make the litter box as convenient and comfortable to use as possible.
- **Accidents Happen.** – Cleaning up soiled areas is very important. Using an enzyme cleaner will be the best way to eliminate the scent. If your pet can smell urine, he may be stimulated to go there again. If you can get rid of the soiled item, it is best to do so.

It is important to consider all of these issues when attempting to resolve your pet's litter box problems. The problem may not be caused by a single issue, and finding the right recipe for the perfect litter box etiquette may take a little detective work.

### **PUNISHMENT**

If you catch your cat in the middle of an accident try to stay calm and neutral. Interrupt the behavior with a clap of your hands or a loud HEY, but be careful not to be too loud. You do not want to scare your cat; you just want to interrupt the behavior. Then redirect your cat to his box. When he goes in his box, offer lots of verbal praise and a small food treat (tuna or freeze dried liver). This will positively reinforce the desired behavior (going in the box). Punishing your cat by yelling, rubbing their nose in an accident or spanking will only make your pet more stressed. It will not resolve the problem, it may make it worse, and you could injure your pet or become injured yourself by a scratch or a bite.

### **AVERSIVES**

The use of an aversive as a form of remote punishment, such as a squirt bottle to spray your cat with water when he eliminates outside of the box, will not address the reason why your cat is having a problem. This type of punishment may have short term results but the undesired behavior will ultimately continue. Other aversive approaches to controlling your pet's environment may be helpful while working on a behavior modification plan. Making an area your on which your cat has chosen to eliminate unattractive (by placing aluminum foil or a carpet mat with the pointy side up) will decrease the likelihood of your cat returning to eliminate in that specific area.

### **TIPS AND HINTS**

- It is important to remember that animals do not share the same emotional motivations as humans. Your cat is not refusing to use his litter box out of anger or spite over something you did or did not do to him.
- Spraying and marking territory are completely different issues and separate from common litter box problems. A cat that is spraying will back up to a vertical surface and express small amounts of urine on walls, furniture, windows, doors and other surfaces. Having your pet spayed or neutered may help prevent this behavior from developing.
- Some temporary confinement may be necessary during the behavior modification period.
- If your cat is eliminating in a specific area (other than the box), try putting an additional box in that spot. Once he begins using the new box consistently, gradually move it (2 to 3 inches a day) to a more desired location. Keep in mind the guidelines for locations.