

DECODING LITTER BOX PROBLEMS

SOLVING LITTER BOX PROBLEMS

When a cat stops using the litter box it's frustrating and stressful for both cat and cat parent. It's also, sadly, one of the most common reasons a cat may get a one-way ticket to the nearest shelter. There are many reasons why a cat may avoid the litter box and it's important to figure out the true cause. The behavior shouldn't be a deal-breaker when it comes to whether the cat gets to stay in the home. While some reasons for litter box aversion may be more complex, there are often some simple mistakes cat parents make. Once medical causes are ruled out, re-evaluate the set-up and other environmental factors because they can have a big impact on whether a cat is drawn to or away from the box.

WHY IS THE CAT NOT USING THE BOX?

Common reasons for litter box avoidance:

- Medical
- Litter box set-up/conditions
- Stress/household dynamics
- Marking/communication

Reasons cat parents often attribute to litter box avoidance:

- Stupidity by the cat
- Spite
- Cat seeking revenge
- Cat being mad
- Cat being untrainable

The above reasons often make the cat parents feel better because it takes the blame off their shoulders and puts it squarely on the cat. These assumptions only serve to increase stress, delay getting the proper help for the cat and cause a deterioration in the cat/owner bond.

BAD CAT?

What we label as "inappropriate" elimination and urine marking are both normal cat behaviors. They both serve important social, physical and practical functions for the cat when it comes to survival. It's actually counter-productive to label the behavior as "inappropriate" because it leads one to believe the cat is misbehaving.

THE BOTTOM LINE

A litter box problem means one or more of the cat's needs aren't being met:

- Medically
- Socially
- Physically

When cat parents delay in having the cat checked by a veterinarian, undiagnosed medical issues can continue to drive the cat away from the box as well as cause unnecessary suffering. A cat with the need to eliminate more frequently may not be able to get to the box in time if it's located too far away or there are too few boxes for the size of the home.

Ignoring social needs of the cat may be causing litter box avoidance if the cat is uncomfortable sharing a box with other cats, is intimidated by others or if the path to the litter box is viewed as unsafe.

As for physical needs, the box that was a good size when the cat was a kitten or was several pounds lighter than he is right now, may no longer be comfortable. The covered box may cause physical discomfort if he must squish himself in there. Older cats with arthritis or less mobile cats may now have trouble getting into a high-sided box.

To solve the problem and figure out what needs aren't being met, you need to take a *who, what, where, when* and *why* approach.

WHAT HAPPENS TO MANY CATS WITH LITTER BOX ISSUES?

Sadly, many cats are relinquished to shelters for litter box problems that may have been easily resolved. The cat is then labeled as having a litter box problem and it becomes harder for him to be placed in another home. Litter box problems can be a deal-breaker for a cat.

Litter box problems also cause cats to be end up abandoned or euthanized. If the cat parents have the mindset that the behavior was caused by spite or revenge, it becomes easier for them to justify their decision to give up on the cat.

For the cats who stay in their homes, some receive the proper help needed but some are subjected to:

- Inappropriate punishment
- Ongoing stress
- Detachment from family members
- Detachment from other cat companions
- Banishment to the outdoors
- Abuse

BEFORE YOU CAN SOLVE THE PROBLEM, YOU MUST IDENTIFY THE BEHAVIOR

Undesirable Elimination (urine)

The cat typically squats as in normal elimination and urinates on a horizontal surface (such as the carpet, floor, bed, sofa). The urine will be in a puddle as the cat will typically empty his bladder with each episode. Note: cats with medical issues that result in painful elimination may urinate in small amounts.

Undesirable Elimination (feces)

The cat will eliminate in the normal posture. Targeted areas are horizontal surfaces and the locations may be hidden or open. After elimination, the cat often attempts to cover.

Spraying (urine)

Spray-marking is usually directed at vertical objects although there may be a small puddle on the floor or carpet where the urine has dripped down after being sprayed. The cat will back up to the targeted object and remain in a standing position as opposed to the normal urination squatting posture. His tail will twitch as he sprays, he may close his eyes and tread with his front paws. The urine stream released will be thin.

The spray-mark is a very direct and convenient communication tool since it's released at the appropriate nose height of other cats. It becomes hard to miss!

There are some cats who may spray horizontally. The urine sprayed will be in a thin stream.

Middening (feces)

This behavior is usually displayed in open areas and pathways. The cat doesn't attempt to cover since it's meant to be a visual marker in addition to an olfactory one.

IDENTIFY THE CAT

If you have a multicat household and aren't sure which cat is displaying the behavior, there are several methods you can use although the most reliable is to either catch the cat in the act or to view the behavior on video. Keep in mind though that more than one cat may be responsible. It's important to be thorough in your investigation and not make assumptions or you may miss valuable clues.

Capturing video is by far the most reliable method. Video evidence helps you not only to identify the cat but also the immediate conditions surrounding the behavior and possibly what triggered it. There are many inexpensive home security cameras available that can be set up in trigger areas. *Wyze Cam* is one brand I often use with clients. The cameras are inexpensive and the app can be easily installed on your smartphone. There are multiple other brands as well that are easy to install if you don't already have an indoor security camera system set up in your home. Capturing the behavior on video is the most reliable method as it will not only identify which cat is displaying the unwanted elimination, but also provide clues as to the trigger.

An old method that was popular before video surveillance became easily accessible was Fluorescein. Veterinarians may still use this method but it's not always accurate. This is a harmless ophthalmic dye that

can be placed in a gelatin capsule and administered orally to a cat. This dye causes some urine to fluoresce. Not all urine will fluoresce so this detection method isn't nearly as good as capturing video.

Confinement is another method used by some cat parents but this is not reliable because the cat who isn't confined may be the one displaying the behavior, and with no reason to exhibit it when separated from a feuding feline companion.

Crayon shavings (from non-toxic crayons) can be put into the food to help identification of a defecating cat. Again, this is another method that is not as accurate as video surveillance.

IDENTIFY TARGETED AREAS

Some cats, especially if they've been punished in the past, may choose very hidden locations for elimination. Purchase a black light at your local pet product store or online so you can identify all soiled locations. For the urine to fluoresce with the black light you'll have to darken the room. The method I use is to outline the soiled areas with painter's tape. This way, when the lights are turned back on you know exactly where you need to clean and won't risk missing any spots. Painter's tape doesn't leave a sticky residue so it's safe for carpets, floors and upholstery.

To clean, use a product specifically labeled for cleaning and neutralizing urine stain and odor.

THE LITTER BOX SET-UP

Does it have cat appeal? Things to consider are:

- Size
- Shape
- Type of box
- Location of box(es)
- Number of boxes
- Type of litter substrate
- Cleaning and maintenance of the box

Litter Box Size

Most litter boxes are too small. Ideally, the box should be 1 ½ times the length of the cat from tip of the nose to base of the tail.

Litter Box Type

There are many types of boxes available and at first glance, there are some that may seem to be a dream come true for cat parents but they could be a behavior problem just waiting to happen.

From the cat parent's perspective, a covered box seems ideal, as it offers:

- Privacy
- Litter scatter control
- Ability to keep cat pee and poop from being on display
- Odor control

If we look at it from the human's point of view, a covered box appears, at least initially, to keep everything neat and tidy inside the box and only the cat has to look at it. Unfortunately, many behavior problems occur because we, as cat parents, look at a cat's environment from *our* point of view and neglect to see things from *the cat's perspective*.

How does the cat view the covered box?

- A covered box can make a larger cat feel cramped while in there.
- Covered boxes don't allow as much air circulation so it takes longer for litter to dry.
- Odor is contained in the box, so it can be more offensive to the cat who is inside.
- A covered box limits a cat's visual field to see if another companion animal is approaching.
- A covered box limits a cat's escape potential and can create opportunities for being ambushed.
- A covered box may not get scooped often enough.

Electronic and self-cleaning boxes may frighten an approaching cat due to the sound of the motor. These boxes are also not large enough for the cat. Yes, the total box itself is very large if you include the motor and housing but the actual usable litter area for the cat is small. Some electronic boxes also have problems getting jammed when there's a large diarrhea clump.

Most commercial litter boxes are also too small. I often recommend that my clients purchase plastic storage containers so they can customize the size of the box to the cat. If the reason you liked a covered litter box was for litter scatter control, you can buy a high-sided storage container and cut a low-sided entry on one end for your cat. Sand sharp edges after cutting.

LITTER BOX MAINTENANCE

In addition to most litter boxes being too small, many aren't cleaned often enough. The box should be scooped at least twice daily. Nobody wants to use an unflushed toilet.

Even if the litter you buy advertises that the box never has to be cleaned, don't fall for it. The litter box needs to be thoroughly scrubbed at least once or twice a month if you use scoopable litter and at least weekly if using non-clumping litter.

When washing the litter box, keep in mind the sensitivity of a cat's nose. Residue from heavily scented cleaners may cause litter box avoidance. Never use ammonia to clean the litter box as there's ammonia in urine and it'll make the box smell urine-soiled. Use plain hot water or water heavily diluted with bleach. Rinse until there is absolutely no trace of odor from cleanser.

Litter box additives were created for odor control but their scents may be objectionable to cats. The best odor control is to keep the litter box clean and not try to mask the urine odor with an artificial floral scent.

Don't use litter box liners to avoid scrubbing the litter box itself. Liners get holes in them from the cat's claws and urine will seep underneath. Some cats also find it uncomfortable when they get their claws stuck on the

plastic as they try to dig or cover. Litter box liners never fit the box perfectly so there are typically folds where urine can puddle.

Litter box deterioration is also something to monitor. Litter boxes aren't designed to last forever. Scratched boxes can harbor odor and bacteria. Heavily scratched boxes can also be an uncomfortable texture for the cat's paws. Change out the box as soon as it shows a little wear. In our house, litter boxes are replaced every one or two years, depending on condition.

LITTER

When it comes to litter substrate there are many choices. Many of those choices are designed to appeal to the human family member and not necessarily the cat who will be the one using the box.

Cats can Have Preferences

In general, the most appealing type of litter to use is one that has a soft, sandy texture. Most of the scoopable, clumping litters fit into this category because they have a very soft feel and when wet, the litter forms a solid ball that can be scooped up and removed from the litter box.

There are other types of litter made of corn, wheat, newspaper pellets, pebbles, you name it. Manufacturers spend lots of money trying to come up with the next greatest litter but the bottom line is that the cat must want to use it. You may want to purchase a litter that is eco-friendly or has an appealing scent but if kitty doesn't like it you've just wasted your money and caused stress to the cat.

Litter Scent

Avoid scented litter or perfumed litter additives. All they do is attempt to cover an odor that won't exist in the first place if you scoop on a regular basis. Your cat's sensitive nose doesn't need to be bombarded by an overpowering scent of flowers when he steps into the box; what he wants is to basically smell nothing or just his own scent.

Litter Texture

Many cats have texture preferences when it comes to litter substrate. Pay attention to any preferences your cat may have when purchasing litter. Find a type that your cat likes and stick with that one.

Depth

In general, keep the depth at about 3 inches. This gives the cat plenty of litter for digging and covering. Too little litter in the box will create an odor problem and maybe even a litter box avoidance issue. Too much litter can be uncomfortable for the cat to stand on when eliminating. It's also important to maintain a consistent level. As you scoop clumps of soiled litter, top off with fresh litter as needed to maintain a comfortable level.

Switching Brands

Cats are creatures of habit so don't make abrupt changes in the brand or type of litter you purchase. When kitty enters the litter box he will expect to feel the same texture on his paws that he felt yesterday. If you must make a brand/type change, add a little of the new litter into the current brand so the switch occurs over the course of several days.

Litter Aversion

Some signs that the cat may not like the litter can include:

- Scratching at walls and floor
- Cat shakes paws while in the litter
- Cat doesn't dig or cover
- Straddles the box
- Meowing at the box or while inside (this can also indicate pain as well)
- Cat bolts immediately after elimination (some cats bolt out of box normally after defecation)
- Doesn't squat or starts out squatting but lifts rear while urinating

Note: The above signs can also be displayed by cats who have no problem with the litter.

Addressing Litter Aversion

If you suspect it's the litter that the cat doesn't like, start by taking a second look at your cleaning schedule to make sure it isn't the lack of cleanliness that's the problem.

If you're unsure what type of litter your cat would prefer, set out a second box with a different type of litter. This way, your cat will have a choice. In some cases, you may have to set out several boxes (sort of a litter box buffet line).

NEGATIVE ASSOCIATION WITH THE LITTER BOX

Cats can form negative associations with the litter box due to an unpleasant experience:

- Pain or illness
- Diarrhea
- Constipation
- History of being ambushed while in the box
- Startled by a noise while in the box
- The scent of medicine in the urine
- Being cornered in the box to be medicated

NUMBER OF LITTER BOXES

The general rule of thumb is to have the same number of litter boxes as cats plus one more for the house. Break this rule and there's a good chance you'll end up cleaning urine from carpets and floors.

LITTER BOX PLACEMENT

- Don't place boxes near food. It goes against the cat's survival instinct to eliminate far from the nest to keep predators away.
- Make the location convenient for the cat. It's about the cat – not you.
- In a multicat household, don't line all the boxes up in one room. Spread them throughout the house to allow for territorial divisions and to prevent resource guarding.
- Take the cat's personality into consideration as well. Does the cat always need to be near you all the time or does he like being in a private area for elimination?
- Medical concerns must be considered. Make the location convenient for cats with limited mobility or medical issues. It may mean having more boxes in various locations where your cat spends time.
- Provide for social concerns and make sure boxes have adequate escape potential. Don't locate boxes in closets, under cabinets or wedged in corners. In a multicat household it's important that the cat have maximum visual advantage to see if an opponent is approaching and multiple options for escape.

STRESS AND HOUSEHOLD DYNAMICS

Causes of Stress Can Include:

- Tension in the home
- Change
- Inter-cat hostility
- Lack of resource availability
- Punishment
- Abuse
- Trauma
- Lack of training
- Inconsistent training
- Unhealthy environment
- Loneliness and boredom
- Separation anxiety

Stress can be a big factor in why the cat isn't using the litter box. Even if the litter box set-up is ideal, something that is causing stress could show up as a litter box problem.

THE JOURNEY TO THE BOX

Sometimes it's easy to miss subtle signs that all is not happy in your cat's world. In a multicat household, blocking may be displayed by one cat to prevent another cat access to a valuable resource (the litter box, feeding station, bed, a family member). The blocking may not even be intentional but it could still be a stress trigger. The dog may want to play with the cat as he's trying to get to the box or he may follow the cat to the litter box. A child may follow the cat or interrupt him as he's trying to get to the box.

When considering box placement, look at the pathway the cat must take to get there so you can be sure it'll be a safe and peaceful one.

Create a floorplan. Draw a simple floorplan and then identify cat location preferences, resource locations and areas where trouble has occurred. Draw routes to the resources to see if they run through other cats' areas or if they pass areas where confrontations consistently happen. The floorplan may help you look at alternative locations for litter boxes.

ADDRESS MULTICAT ISSUES

Inter-cat Aggression

Many cat parents don't always recognize the fact that their cats aren't getting along with each other because there are no overt signs of aggression. The cats might not be engaging in an outright battle with fur flying so some cat parents miss the subtle signs of tension. Keep in mind that cats generally prefer to not engage in an actual physical confrontation and that's why they go to elaborate attempts at posturing. There can also be some intimidation going on that's just under the radar where one cat engages in behavior such as guarding the path to the litter box or nosing another cat out of the food bowl. Not all companion cats are going to get along 100% of the time; just as with people, there are bound to be some misunderstandings and miscommunication, but if you notice a pattern of intimidation, there may be more stress between your cats than you originally thought.

Find the Cause

To correct the aggression between your cats you must find out what's causing it. If the aggression is sudden and uncharacteristic then there could be an underlying medical cause. Any time there's a change in behavior your cat should be examined by the veterinarian to rule out possible medical causes. One cat might be experiencing pain or has developed arthritis and that may be causing the aggression toward the other cat. Visiting your veterinarian is an important step that shouldn't be skipped.

If the cats had previously gotten along but have suddenly become enemies, then redirected aggression may be a possible cause. One cat may have spotted an unfamiliar animal outside and redirected his aggression toward a companion cat. If one cat visited the veterinarian and then was attacked by his feline companion upon returning home, then that might be non-recognition aggression. There are several types of aggression and various causes so you need to sharpen your detective skills to uncover the trigger.

Tweak the Environment

When the relationship between the cats is tense, but doesn't seem serious or dangerous, then you may be able to begin a behavior program to help them feel more at ease with each other. This involves creating an environment that inspires security as well as doing some behavior work.

Vertical Territory

Vertical territory gives the cats some safe places to perch and oversee their territory. For very assertive cats it can be a way of displaying confidence. By claiming the highest perches in the area, it may be enough of a display so they don't feel the need to engage in aggression. For fearful cats, it can be a safe

place to nap so they aren't at risk of being ambushed from behind. It provides more visual warning time to see if an opponent is approaching.

Positive Associations

The behavioral aspect of helping your cats become friends again involves giving them a reason to like each other. Provide opportunities for good things to happen when they're in the presence of each other. Maybe they get treats when they're together. Feed them in the same room (but use separate bowls) so they learn that whenever food is present, the other cat is nearby (but not threateningly close). Cats aren't social eaters so make sure the bowls are far enough apart to maintain a sense of security.

Use Playtime as a Tool

Use playtime as a behavior modification tool. Conduct individual interactive play therapy sessions so each cat has chances during the day to focus exclusively on being a hunter and can enjoy the game. Do these sessions separately so the cats don't have to worry about each other. In addition, conduct parallel playtime sessions so the cats can play "together" but not have to compete for one toy. If there's another family member available, have them play with one cat while you play with the other. The cats will see they're in the room together but no one is doing any intimidation. If you don't have another family member to help, you can still do parallel play by holding a fishing pole-type toy in each hand. It's awkward at first but you'll get more adept at it with practice.

Solo playtime is also a valuable behavior tool. If the cats have something to focus their attention on other than each other, it may ease the tension.

When Things Aren't Working

What do you do if the relationship between your cats is so serious that there's a risk of someone getting injured? What if they can't even be in the same room together for one second without a battle erupting? Then it's time to do a reintroduction. There are times when the best way to heal the relationship involves starting from scratch. Separate the cats and introduce them again as if they had never met.

MARKING

Marking is a communication tool. Cats mark by spraying (urine marking), middening (fecal marking), rubbing and scratching. To correct the problem, you must:

- 1) Identify the sprayer
- 2) Identify the trigger

Some Common Reasons Cats Spray:

- To define the perimeter for other cats.

- To create a familiar scent in his territory.
- Some cats will spray a family member's belongings as a way of self-soothing by mixing scents.
- A cat may spray a family member's personal belongings (such as a pillow or dirty clothes) as a way of creating a bond.
- A cat may spray a family member's belongings if that family member's schedule has changed or something else about the person's behavior is different.
- A cat might spray a family member's belongings if he isn't sure whether the person presents a threat.
- Since scent and familiarity play important roles in the feline world, some cats spray new objects brought into the environment.
- A cat may spray if he is denied access to another cat who may appear to be a threat (typically this is caused by the appearance of an unfamiliar cat in the yard).
- A cat might spray if anxious, even if there doesn't seem to be an obvious trigger from a human's perspective.
- Cats may spray as a challenge to another cat.
- A cat may spray as a victory display after a hostile altercation with another cat.
- A fearful cat may spray only when there are no other cats or humans around.
- Intact cats spray when looking for mates.

Managing a Spraying Cat

- Clean the soiled area with a product labeled for cleaning and neutralizing cat urine.
- Change the cat's association with that area by engaging in playtime there so it becomes a positive location.
- Use clicker training to click and reward whenever the cat walks by the area without spraying or walks away from an area when called.
- Use a synthetic pheromone spray near the targeted areas so help change the cat's association.
- To prevent further damage to carpets or furniture, you can cover the area with a shower curtain liner temporarily.
- In some cases, the area may need to be closed off completely while you work on behavior.
- Reduce household stress (chaotic environment, erratic schedules, improper new pet introductions, etc).
- increase vertical territory.
- Make sure your cat has safe areas to retreat such as hiding places, cat trees, cat beds.
- In a multicat environment make sure everyone has their own favorite perching spot.
- In a multicat environment increase the number of litter boxes and scatter them throughout the house so no one has to pass an opponent's area to eliminate.
- Set up more than one feeding station so no one has to compete in a multicat environment.

- If you think your cat is about to engage in spraying, distract him with an enticing sound to change his mindset from negative to positive (for example, roll a ping pong ball in the opposite direction).
- Incorporate daily individual interactive playtime to help reduce anxiety and increase feelings of confidence and security.
- Increase environmental enrichment to create constructive and positive diversions.
- In some multicat household cases, cats may need to be separated so a reintroduction can be done.
- If the cat is spraying a family member's items, have that family member be the one who offers the meals and engage the cat in interactive play.
- If the cat is spraying a family member's items, use a synthetic pheromone spray on some of the clothes to help the cat think he has facially rubbed those items.
- If spraying is done as a bonding behavior with a family member, increased playtime and environmental enrichment may help build confidence.
- Ease your cat through changes rather than force him to endure abrupt ones.

SUMMARY

When dealing with litter box avoidance or marking behavior, remember it's easier to prevent than to treat. Ease cats through the transition from shelter/rescue to home environment, or when making any changes in the household (addition of new cat, renovation, etc) and how that life event can affect litter box habits. The bottom line is it's about the *quality* of a cat's space because that's what matters most. The litter box set-up must be appealing, safe and comfortable for each cat in the home.

Connect with us:

Website: www.catbehaviorassociates.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/pam.johnsonbennett

Twitter: @thinklikeecat

Instagram: @thinklikeecat

ABOUT PAM

Pam is a Certified Cat Behavior Consultant and best-selling author of 8 books on cat behavior. She starred in the Animal Planet series *Psycho Kitty*, seen in Canada and the UK. She was vice president of the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants and founded their Cat Division, where she served 8 years as Chair. She has served on advisory boards for the American Humane Association as well as other animal welfare organizations. She lectures internationally on cat behavior and makes frequent television and radio appearances. Previously, she was the cat

behavior columnist for Cats magazine, Modern Cat magazine, The Daily Cat, and Cat Fancy online. She was also the resident cat behavior expert for Yahoo and iVillage online. She is considered a pioneer in the field of cat behavior consulting, having started her career in 1982. Some of her books are used as textbooks in behavior courses and she has influenced many practicing in the field today. Her ground-breaking book, *Think Like a Cat*, is considered the cat bible by veterinarians, shelters, and cat owners worldwide.

For more specific training and behavior information, refer to the books by Pam Johnson-Bennett:

[Cat vs. Cat](#) (newly revised and updated edition): *Keeping Peace When You Have More than one Cat* (Penguin Books)

[CatWise](#): *America's Favorite Cat Expert Answers Your Cat Behavior Questions* (Penguin Books)

[Think Like a Cat](#): *How to Raise a Well-Adjusted Cat – Not a Sour Puss* (Penguin Books)

This handout may not be reproduced without written permission from Cat Behavior Associates.