

## USING TOYS FOR FELINE BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION

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Some people wonder if cats can be trained; cats can in fact be trained to do tricks, come when called and fetch. Fortunately the ability to train a cat to do tricks is actually not required for successful behavior modification. Often the goal is to create a new emotional state in situations that previously resulted in fear, anxiety, aggression or compulsion. It is emotionally incompatible for a cat to both be fearful and display animated play with a feather toy simultaneously. Even if the cat merely feigns interest in the antics of a mechanical mouse and observes from a perch we have successfully affected the cat's emotional state. With repetition and paired association with a stimulus we can build new associations.

### LEARNING

Cats learn by a variety of methods that are adaptive for success in the wild. Quite naturally they startle and react adversely to novel stimuli. With repeated, harmless exposure they may become accustomed to or habituate to that stimuli. Classical conditioning occurs when a neutral stimulus is repeatedly paired with a known stimulus resulting in a new association with the neutral stimulus. Operant conditioning utilizes rewards (or punishers) to increase (or decrease) the probability of a behavior occurring in the future. Successive approximation can be utilized to selectively reinforce incrementally new behaviors that are incompatible with undesirable ones.<sup>1</sup>

Case Example: Fluffy is known to urinate on new furniture. She has difficulty habituating to a new sofa so she is stressed and territorially motivated to urinate on it. By teaching Fluffy to play on familiar sofas with fishing pole toys we operantly condition this new skill. By hiding feeder toys around familiar furniture and in the future location of the new sofa we teach her to look for food around new furniture by successive approximation. When the new sofa is introduced she receives all of her food and interactive play on or as close as to the new sofa she will comfortably interact. This process aids her natural habituation resulting in pleasant association with this novel sofa in her environment.

### WHY USE TOYS?

Toys, feeding puzzles and games can naturally induce a playful, exploratory, appetitive, or predatory emotional state. Think of creating an area of "Kitty Disneyland" in the location, circumstances or associated with specific people or animals. Use of toys for behavior modification requires an appreciation and understanding of the unique preferences and individual activities of the cat in question, an understanding of the

underlying motivations for the problem behaviors and the creativity to use skills, behaviors and tendencies the cat possesses to alter patterns of undesirable or inappropriate behaviors. Environmental modification and environmental enrichment strategies should be attempted before environmental punishment strategies. Punishment and avoidance strategies may efficiently and successfully teach a cat to avoid an area of the home. These strategies may also result in fear or anxiety and must be maintained; once the punishment ceases the cat may eventually return to this area and may resume undesirable behaviors. Determine if the family wants their cat to spend time in the area of the offensive behavior and devise a plan to increase or decrease the cats activities in that location. Consider family preferences when devising a modification program as we can increase or decrease a cat's activity in a specific location. For example if the family is expecting a new baby – determine if the family wants to cat to spend any time in the nursery. If the answer is “no” – then a program is designed to environmentally punish the cat if it enters the room, ideally, long before the baby arrives. On the other hand if they don't mind if the cat is in the nursery just not in the baby's crib then design a plan that focuses on aversive punishment around the crib. If the family wants the cat to spend time in the nursery then promote resting areas, perches and play activities that are compatible with family expectations. Enrichment strategies will allow the cat to utilize more territory in the home in harmony with the family. Enrichment strategies result in a more permanent solution.

Activities for cats which fulfill stimulation of predatory, feeding, exploratory, olfactory or sensory input may all be used as an activity toy for behavior modification. It is a common misconception that cats hunt in order to satisfy hunger. In fact these two common behaviors in cats are independently controlled.<sup>2</sup> Cats will continue to hunt or practice predatory skills despite satiation. Provisions for resting, perching and sleeping areas may fill certain needs and facilitate development of new behaviors. Any behavior a cat engages in may be used to create this area of “Kitty Disneyland” for successful behavior modification and creation of new behaviors.

Table 1: Categories of toys and underlying skills utilized

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Predatory and hunting skills                 | Interactive owner initiated toys<br>Cat initiated toys<br>Battery operated toys               |
| Appetitive or feeding behaviors              | Food puzzles, food dispensers<br>Cat grass or cat nip plants                                  |
| Exploratory or object manipulation behaviors | Cat towers, tunnels, shelves and perches<br>Sleeping or resting areas<br>Puzzle or maze boxes |
| Visual stimulation                           | Videos<br>Laser toys<br>Bird feeders in window<br>Fish tanks<br>Fish or bird screen savers    |

## APPLICATIONS

Every behavior cases have an application for use of toys, environmental enrichment or feeding puzzles to accomplish behavior modification goals.

**Table 2: Strategies for use of toys for behavior problems**

| <b>Behavior problem</b>                            | <b>Modification goals</b>   | <b>Applications</b>  |
|--|---|--|
| House soiling                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create new behaviors in previously soiled areas</li> <li>• Introduce new items in the home that may be eliminated on or marked</li> <li>• Provide environmental enrichment during confinement</li> </ul> | Feeding toys, scratch posts, motion activated toys                         |
| Fear of strangers                                  | Lure cats out of hiding to play and interact  | Fishing pole or laser toys<br>Food rewards<br>Trick training               |
| Fear in the veterinary office                      | Create a positive experience  | Laser toys, cat nip, Feliway   |
| Play aggression in kittens                         | Redirect predatory and normal play to appropriate outlets   | Feeding toys, chase toys, motion activated toys, self play, another kitten |
| Intercat aggression                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Redirect the aggression of the bully</li> <li>• Improve confidence and relieve stress for the victim</li> </ul>  | Feeding toys, chase toys, motion activated toys, self play, cat nip        |
| Redirected aggression                              | Provide outlets for vigilance and predatory focus   | Feeding toys, chase toys, motion activated toys, self play, cat nip        |
| Cognitive Dysfunction                              | Stimulate problem solving skills  | Feeding toys   |
| Compulsive disorders (wool sucking or self trauma) | Redirect to appropriate outlets for oral stimulation  | Cat safe plants or herbs, Hills T/D and feeding toys                       |
| Compulsive disorders (tail chasing)                | Redirect to appropriate outlets of frustration, anxiety or arousal  | Feeding toys, predatory toys and cat nip                                   |

## EXAMPLES OF TOYS USEFUL FOR BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION

Toys for cats may be homemade, purchased or items already present in your home. Look for items that are safe and stimulate your cats natural play behaviors. Some are suitable

for supervised and interactive play and other are designed for solitary feline fun. Be sure to consult [www.ovrs.com](http://www.ovrs.com) for these and other sources of toys for cats.

Table 3: Commercially available toys and sources<sup>3</sup>

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Da' Bird Fishing Pole toys                         | <a href="http://www.thecatconnection.com">www.thecatconnection.com</a>  |
| Peek and Play toy box or the Tick Tock Teaser      | <a href="http://www.esmartcat.com">www.esmartcat.com</a>  |
| Play-N-Treat® Ball                                 | <a href="http://www.ourpets.com">www.ourpets.com</a>  |
| Pavlov's cat (Scratching post that dispenses food) | <a href="http://www.mktmkt.com/pavlovscat.html">www.mktmkt.com/pavlovscat.html</a><br>Del West Enterprises, San Diego, CA |
| Kitty Kong® or Hugga Wubba                         | <a href="http://www.kongcompany.com">www.kongcompany.com</a>  |
| Cosmic Catnip                                      | <a href="http://www.cosmicpet.com">www.cosmicpet.com</a>  |
| Busy Buddy Toys – Twist and Treat                  | Premier Pet Products – <a href="http://www.gentleleader.com">www.gentleleader.com</a>                                     |
| “Come with me Kitty” harness                       | Premier Pet Products – <a href="http://www.gentleleader.com">www.gentleleader.com</a>                                     |
| T/D tartar control diet                            | Hill's Pet Nutrition, <a href="http://www.hillspet.com">www.hillspet.com</a>  |
| Feline Flyer (Fishing pole toy)                    | Cat's Claw's Las Vegas, NV  |
| Cat Dancer (Fishing pole toy)                      | <a href="http://www.catdancer.com">www.catdancer.com</a><br>Cat Dancer Products, Neenah, WI                               |
| Zanies Laser Mouse                                 | <a href="http://www.baxterboo.com">http://www.baxterboo.com</a>   |
| Kat Walk Shelves                                   | <a href="http://www.katwalk.com">www.katwalk.com</a>  |
| Drinking water fountains                           | Many sources and styles   |
| Heated beds, cat towers or window seats            | Many sources and styles   |

Table 4: Suggestions for homemade toys

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Recycled material: Paper bag, boxes, tissue box, paper towel rolls | Put food, toys, or cat nip inside                                  |
| Bath tub (dry)   | Ping pong ball, cat nip  |
| Sink (wet)   | Running or dripping water<br>Food floating on surface              |
| Plastic bottles  | Put dry kibble inside. Make additional holes for easier dispensing |

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Indoor Cat Initiative: [www.indoorcat.org](http://www.indoorcat.org)

American Association of Feline Practitioners Behavior Guidelines at  
[www.catvets.com](http://www.catvets.com)

Landsberg GL, Hunthausen WL, Ackerman L. Handbook of Canine and Feline Behavior, 2nd edition, Saunders, Oxford, England, 2004

Horwitz D, Landsberg G. 83 Client Behavior Handouts on CD, [www.lifelearn.com](http://www.lifelearn.com), 2005

Horwitz, Mills and Heath eds. BSAVA Manual of Canine and Feline Behavioural Medicine BSAVA, Gloucester, UK. 2002

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<sup>1</sup> Hart, B, Hart, L, and Bain, M “Canine and Feline Behavior Therapy” 2<sup>nd</sup> ed 2006 23-47

<sup>2</sup> Horwitz, D, Mills, D and Heath, S BSAVA Manual of Canine and Feline Behavioural Medicine 220-221

<sup>3</sup> Bergman, L “Ain’t Misbehavin’ Feline Play Aggression” Veterinary Technician May 2001