



Surviving the Feline Teens

As your cat matures from kittenhood to adolescence, behavior once giggled over may now be seen as obnoxious. A less tolerant owner might begin to search for another home for Fluffy Sue and Tigger. This age calls for a little understanding. Perhaps looking at your cat's behavior through his eyes will provide you with that very comprehension.

I. SPRAYING

Hormones! The bane to any parent's existence whether you be parent to cats or kids — or both. As a young male feline matures, he feels the need to mark off his territory and let his competition know about it. This is done by sashaying up to a vertical surface, hiking up his tail and letting loose with a spray of urine and possibly, anal sac secretions. This usually happens at the stage his urine is beginning to smell all grown up, smelling more like the urine of cheetahs rather than chinchilla Persians.

The solution to a spraying Tom, Dick or Harry is a simple one: neuter immediately and there is a 90% chance that he will never spray again. The older the cat, the longer he has been spraying; so there is less chance that neutering alone will make it all go away. If he — or in rare cases, she — is still spraying, more drastic measures are called for: blocking outdoor views, behavior modification, re-homing additional cats, drug therapy, and other veterinary procedures. All because he doesn't want other cats in his territory! Better yet neuter him before puberty (between two and six months) and you are virtually guaranteed to avoid spraying.

II. ESTRUS

Has your female cat become smotheringly affectionate while purring, "Hey sailor, new in town?" If she is between five and ten months old, chances are she has gone into her first heat (estrus). She will yowl, roll about the floor and rub all over anything available for approximately 10 -14 days. She may also urinate around the house in her attempt to advertise for mates.

The solution is simple. Buy ear plugs, confine the cat to an easily cleaned room like the bathroom or kitchen, if Fluffy Sue is urinating outside the litter box and make an appointment to get her spayed. She will be a bit easier to live with if you know this heat cycle will be her last. By the way, there is no need to put yourself through this kitty hell in the first place. Some shelters and veterinarians are safely spaying kittens as early as two months of age.

III. SCRATCHING

Do you hear it, that rhythmic scratch, scratch, scratch down the side of your new sofa? Why is Fluffy Sue destroying new furniture when she has that obscenely expensive, color coordinated, carpet-covered scratching post standing unused half a room away? One reason is because she is trying to leave her mark, to claim that piece of furniture as part of her property/territory. The second, and perhaps more pressing reason, is because she is trying to loosen irritating old nail sheaths, so new nails can grow.

What's an owner to do? First, trim the cat's nails every two to three weeks to keep them relatively blunt. Second, provide a scratching post covered with a rough material (sisal is ideal but rope, starched burlap, or natural bark also suffices) that is at least three feet tall with a wide, sturdy base that won't tip over even when climbed or "attacked" by the cat. A short or unsteady post will be of no use to a cat and will be rejected in favor of non-tip furniture.





Keep the post interesting by sprinkling it with catnip every couple of weeks. Draw the cat's attention to the post by playing interactive games around the post with the cat. Place it near your feline's favorite resting place for the urge to scratch is strongest upon awakening. Place another one in front of whatever "sign post" he already scratches, after a month of scratching the cat post rather than the furniture, you can move it an inch a day to a more convenient location.

Don't think that declawing will be the answer to your prayers. Anecdotally, some believe this surgical amputation can shake your cat's confidence to the point that he may stop using the litterbox, become a biter or start hiding in dark out-of-the-way places to avoid social interactions. Behavior changes aside, it is a painful surgery that is a drastic, irreversible solution and should be left as a last resort.

IV. PREDATORY/PLAY AGGRESSION

Crouch, stalk, pounce, and bite! That was no mouse, that was an ankle! Felines are predators; as early as eight weeks of age, many cats have had all the training they need to be Mighty Hunters. If your cat was taken away from his littermates too early (prior to 8-10 weeks old) and he was not actively taught to inhibit his bite, you may find yourself his next hapless victim.

He needs an outlet for his predatory play behavior. Channel the predation toward playthings that you can make come alive. If your cat zeros in on your body parts, correct him with a loud hiss or blow a puff of air in his face. For more hard core cases, use a spritz of water, compressed canned air or a loud noise. Praise him for any interest he shows in the toy you are tantalizing him with. No hitting please, or his predatory play could swiftly turn into defensive aggression. Never tantalize him by tapping your fingers or toes, always place a toy between you and your cat during play.

V. NOCTURNAL BEHAVIOR

Did your cat keep you up last night? Contrary to popular belief, cats are not nocturnal creatures the way bats and raccoons are, but latchkey adolescents have been known to get restless, usually near dawn. When cats hunt, they stalk, pounce, kill and then eat their prey. Replicating this predatory ritual by playing interactive games and then serving dinner can be tremendously satisfying for your cat. A 10 minute play session followed by a fashionably late dinner does wonders for an early rising youngster.

Make sure you are not inadvertently teaching your cat any bad habits. If he cries loud and long and you get up to (a) feed him, (b) play with him, (c) cuddle with him, or (d) all of the above, he will be rewarded for his bad behavior and will repeat the annoying behavior over and over. Do not give in to his commands. Play possum. Draw the covers up over your head and ignore his demands. A behavior that is not rewarded will eventually extinguish.

For those who can't stand it a minute more, create a play space/bedroom for your cat in a room like the bathroom. A litterbox, bed, and various types of toys dangling off doorknobs and towel racks should fill the environment. This will be your cat's bedroom until he outgrows his pre-dawn antsiness. Don't wait until he wakes you up, tuck him in there at bedtime. He earns access to your bed by his stellar behavior — by learning to sleep in until you say so.

During this stage of rambunctious high energy, willful excessive playfulness and boundary testing; patience, a sense of humor and a sound understanding of feline adolescent behavior are the best weapons.

Jacque Lynn Schultz
©ASPCA, Revised 2001