

These articles on detecting and solving litter box problems are excerpted from two issues of "Creature Thoughts", the free montly e-newsletter of animal communicator Gayle Nastasi. "Creature Thoughts" can be found online at Gayle's website, <http://www.gazehound.com>

May 2012



Gotta Love Them Kitties....

I'd like to preface this issue with an apology to all my canine, equine, lagomorphic, mustelidaen (I'll let you guess at that one, as I confess to having sort of made it up), friends and those of other genres as well. It's just that the influx of clients calling because of kitty litter box problems has expanded exponentially in the last couple months. I thought I would post an edited excerpt of an article I wrote several years ago, in case some of the thoughts therein might help those who are seeking a more pleasant experience with their cats.

What follows is a "feline owner-detective's checklist", of sorts; things to consider when facing a litter box problem, once it's absolutely certain any potential health causes have been ruled out. Of course, making sure there are no health issues should always be step one in trying to solve house-soiling troubles (for any species, though I doubt too many peoples' horses are peeing in their sinks....).

If health issues have been satisfactorily ruled out, it's probable that the cat is upset about something. Determining exactly what is disturbing him can take some real detective work. This is where it helps to think like a cat. Cats are territorial, they have complicated social structures, their noses are incredibly sensitive, they are fastidiously clean (yes, even the ones pooping on the rugs, at least from their point of view!). Some cats even border on being a bit obsessive-compulsive about their toilets. Here is a check list of things cat owners can look for. They should remember to scan this list from the perspective of the cat.

Is the litter box not secluded enough? (Some cats are very sensitive about their privacy.)

Is it too secluded? (Many cats like to know they have an escape route from a vulnerable position; others are of the *out of sight, out of mind* variety and a box that's too inaccessible is not appealing to them.)

Are the litter boxes in a place that, to the cat, seems too much trouble to get to? (A cat who has always happily climbed the stairs to the basement, for instance, may stop doing that comfortably once he's a bit older and starting to experience stiffness in the joints or other changes.)

Is the box, or the space it's in, the wrong size for the cat? Maine Coon sized cats are going to need more space to maneuver than a little slender cat of Oriental lineage, for example.

Are there not enough litter boxes for the number of cats (in many cases, making sure each cat has its own box, and sometimes "plus a spare", in different rooms of the house, is all it takes to solve the problem)?

Is your cat an older cat with a covered box? (Arthritis can often make crouching in a hooded litter box painful.) Similarly, are the sides too high?

Is there a cat in the house, or a dog, or a child, who does not allow kitty his privacy when using the box? Remember to see this not from your perspective, but from the cat's. Sometimes a dog simply having access to the room the box is located in will be enough to make the cat feel exposed, even if the dog doesn't normally bother the cat while he is actually taking care of business.

Is the box being cleaned often enough? If so, are cleaners being used that might leave an odor that bothers the cat (remember, just because a scent is pleasant to you doesn't mean it is comfortable to a cat's sensitive nose)? Are the boxes being rinsed well after washing? (And please: no disinfectants that contain any type of phenol product, such as Lysol. They are very toxic to cats.) Scoopable litters should have enough litter in them to dig comfortably and be scooped at least twice daily, preferably whenever they're soiled. They should be emptied and washed frequently enough to eliminate all traces of odor that might cling to the plastic.

Is the cat averse to the texture of the litter? This situation can often lead to the cat becoming attached to other textures, which leads to a double problem if that texture is one of carpet, bath-mat, hardwood floor, or bed pillow! Litter texture problems are known to be quite common with declawed cats (which is, of course, actually a health issue that must be considered), especially. In fact:

Is the cat declawed? This in itself can lead to a plethora of potty problems that are extremely hard to remedy.

Is there another cat, or other strange animal, hanging around outside the house? Even an indoor cat can consider that his territory, and become very upset if an intruder is leaving its mark close to home.

Is the cat's feeding station too close to a litter box? Cats often dislike eating near where they go potty, and will seek elsewhere to eliminate.

Have you been using a pheromone product such as Feliway too close to the litter box? These are wonderful products, but it has been shown that if used near the box, they may actually lead the cat away from where he is supposed to be “going”. This is because these pheromones mimic cheek-rub “comfort scents”, and a cat doesn’t normally pee/poop where he rubs.

Have you been absolutely sure to remove all trace of lingering odor in the places the cat is choosing to eliminate inappropriately? It’s important to use a really good oxygenic or enzymatic cleaner such as Stink Free or Anti-Icky Poo for this. (These are the two products many clients have reported back to let me know work best). Invest in a decent black light to help you track down those spots, too.

Is there Change? “Change” is capitalized because it can literally mean anything. Change and Cats don’t mix very well, and even things that seem to be minor details to a human (such as moving furniture, changing the decor, or having house guests, for example) can be very disturbing to a cat.

Although the list above is far from exclusive, it should shift a person’s way of thinking so that they can explore other possibilities as well. Determining what might be upsetting a cat can often lead to natural clues toward fixing the problem.

I hope our kitty-owned humans find the list helpful! Perhaps there will be a Part Two of this series next month. Or maybe we’ll get lucky and all those naughty felines will start behaving themselves!



October 2012

Kitty-Litter Capers: “So what do we do about it?”

“They’re Back”....

Who’s back? Those naughty kitties who are peeing, spraying, or pooping outside their litter boxes.

“Naughty”, of course, is a matter of perspective. As I go through in detail in my book, [Through Their Eyes: The Nature of the Beast](#), most “problems” we have with our pets really are only a problem from the human perspective. To the pet, they are usually something totally different, and trying to get the animals to understand why these behaviors are a problem to their *humans* can be a major part of the challenge.

As with all issues we have with our animal friends, however, the “getting them to understand” factor is indeed only a part of the solution. When it comes to soiling the house, especially with cats, it’s usually only a *small* part. In [May’s Creature Thoughts](#), we took a look at litter box problems from the angle of doing detective work to find out why the cat might be avoiding the box or spraying. That article, in fact, has since been included as a link in my “litter box checklist” email, and one shelter is even handing it out with all their new cat adoptions. Finding the “why” is, of course, only half of the equation. The other half is: What do we do about it once we know “why”?

As anyone who has ever visited my website knows (and I’ve done some editing to make it even more apparent), I see animal communication as only one tool among many that we have to help our pets. In the case of litter box issues, the “other stuff” really is just as important (if not moreso) as communication with the cat. Litter box issues are not going to be solved unless the humans in the household are dedicated to doing what is physically necessary, in the way of medical care, training, and modifying the environment in various ways, to help the cat. In fact, I must say, while I have known many situations where animal communication helped the issue, I have never once in thirteen years met a cat whose bad habits about the litter box and/or spraying were “fixed” by communicating alone. The clients and friends (not to mention our own household) who found a solution to the problem only did so after taking dedicated, physical, *action* of some sort (often many sorts) and sticking religiously to the plan.

So, without further ado, to add to our “Detective Work” checklist of May, here is another, hopefully helpful, list of....

Things to Do

Absolute #1 priority:if health problems are found during the vet-check process, make sure they are being properly treated. If a health issue is behind a cat’s marking or accidents, this can sometimes be all you need to solve the problem.

Try different litters, including [Dr. Elsey’s Cat Attract litter](#) (now available from PetSmart, Amazon.com, etc). My own personal favorite is [World’s Best](#), but “your mileage may vary” depending on the preference of your cats.

Many people have reported in that “Cat Attract” was a huge help toward solving their problems.

Examine the situation with other pets in the home, if there are any, to be sure there is not a competition going on for the litter box, or the cat in question is not being chased/disturbed when he needs privacy. Does your cat need more space (escape route) around the box? Is the box already exposed and the cat wants more seclusion? Cats are as individual as people where their comfort levels are concerned, so be ready to physically adjust your litter box situation if necessary.

What about the box itself? Is it covered (and thus trapping unpleasant smells around the cat)? Uncovered (and you have a cat who likes more privacy)? Are the sides too high for an older cat who might be feeling a bit arthritic? Consider changing to a different type of litter box if it seems that this might be part of the problem.

Make sure there is *at least one litter box per cat* (plus a spare depending on how many cats there are), located in ways that each cat has a choice. Are all your boxes lined up in a row in the same room? Probably not a good idea if you have a cat who prefers privacy. Try relocating some of them closer to the problem areas.

Use [Feliway spray](#) in comfort zones (I find the spray works much better than the plug-in infusers), but *NOT* in the area near any of the litter boxes (if you use Feliway near a box, since it applies cheek pheromones to the area sprayed, it actually will drive cats *away* from the litter box, because cats instinctively don't "go" where they "rub").

Try using the cat's own "Feliway" type hormones in target areas, by taking a very slightly damp cloth and rubbing it on kitty's cheeks/corners of her lips. Then either rub the scent on the areas you want to address, or even just leave the cloth there (as long as the problem isn't kitty peeing on cloth items).

If you have multiple cats, do you have plenty of vertical space (cat trees, shelving, etc) so that they can each establish their own comfort zones?

I've known quite a few situations where the problem was helped significantly by adding another cat tree or a bit of cat shelving.

Look, also, at travel routes through the house. Is the cat with the problem insecure, and would she benefit by providing "tunnel space" for her to walk along walls, or climbing areas so that she can traverse the outskirts of the room up off the floor?

Have you tried playing interactively, on a scheduled basis, every day for at least five to fifteen minutes, with the cat in the areas where he is peeing or pooping (providing it's not just right next to the box)? Like cheek-rubbing, playground space is something that will instinctively establish a "no go zone" for a cat

Play therapy works best when it's paired with treats and/or meal time. Cats need to hunt and catch, and by playing interactively with a [Cat Dancer](#) or [DaBird](#) (see Missie's photo above, she loves her Cat Dancer) for ten minutes, getting kitty slightly winded, letting her catch her "prey" and then feeding her (eat the "catch"), it can provide the natural outlet a cat needs to reduce their anxiety.

Similarly, have you tried feeding (either meals, treats, or both) the cat in those accident areas (again, *not* if it's right next to the box)?

Are you using a *good* enzymatic cleaner, such as [Stink Free](#) or [Anti Icky-Poo](#) (I no longer recommend Nature's Miracle, many clients have reported that the others work much better) on every spot the kitty is soiling to be sure you get the scent out completely so he's not being drawn back to the same spots? Purchase of a quality black light will help you to track down the spots.

Books such as [Starting from Scratch](#) by Pam Johnson Bennett and other modern day pet behaviorists (do you watch Jackson Galaxy's *My Cat From Hell* on Animal Planet? If you have a kitty, you should!) can often provide other ideas as well. If you visit the Book Shop section of www.gazehound.com you will find reviews and descriptions of many of these books in the Training and Behavior section.

Consider exploring TTouch for Cats (otherwise known as Tellington Touch), which many people have found helpful in reducing a cat's anxiety levels so that he no longer feels the need to mark, and becomes more comfortable with the litter box. Linda Tellington Jones' [*Getting in TTouch With Your Cat*](#) is a good place to start.

And of course, you can always ask a communicator to help explain *why* this is a problem for the cat's family

By doing your detective work (yes, sometimes with the help of your friendly neighborhood communicator) and figuring out the "why", and by diligently coming up with a plan of *action* (and sticking to it unfailingly) to tackle the behavior, a cat with litter box issues can, indeed, and I believe *without exception* be "fixed". I know it sounds like a lot of work for a pet parent, but take heart—the pay-off, a happy, healthy, well-behaved kitty who is no longer destroying your home—is huge!