

Common Mistakes Made by New Cat Parents



As a cat behaviorist, I'm thrilled when people contact me BEFORE they bring home a new cat. It's the perfect opportunity for me to help them figure out which cat is right for them, how to cat-proof the home and set up the environment to be cat friendly, prepare them for how to do any introductions to current resident pets, and in general, work with them to make informed decisions. All-too-often though, cat adoptions are impulsive decisions and cat parents aren't fully prepared for what it means to be a cat parent. Here are some of the common mistakes I see:

Getting a Cat Who Isn't Right For You

Many pet adoptions are done impulsively and as a result, far too many animals get brought back to the shelter. Whether you are adopting or purchasing a cat, make sure she is a good fit for your family and your environment. Think carefully about whether a kitten or adult cat would be better... if you're considering a purebred, make sure you do your homework. Think about your home environment, your schedule, whether this is the right time to adopt, etc.

Viewing a Cat as Low Maintenance

It breaks my heart whenever I hear people say that they didn't have the time for a dog so they adopted a cat. All-too-often, people adopt cats and then only interact with them at their convenience. The cat is left to his own devices and then the cat parent is disappointed when the relationship doesn't seem to grow. If you want to have a relationship you have to be willing to invest in it. Don't view cats as convenience pets.

Not Providing Routine Veterinary Care

Cats are the most popular pet in America but yet more dogs get seen by veterinarians. Cats aren't being taken for veterinary care the way they should. Don't make the mistake of thinking that because your cat never goes outdoors she doesn't need yearly vaccinations and health exams. Your cat needs regular veterinary care.

Neglecting to Spay or Neuter

Unless you live under a rock you know there are homeless pets everywhere and shelters are overcrowded. Animals are dying on a daily basis because there is no shelter space available. And, if the pet overpopulation issue doesn't leave an effect on you then I hope this will: an unneutered male WILL urine-mark. A male cat who is ruled by his hormones will definitely follow his instinct to mark his territory. Your furniture will become the victims of male urine. If you think you can avoid that by making him an outdoor cat, you will doom him to being the victim of cat fights or inflicting injury on other cats. He will also continue to mate (contributing to over-population). For a female cat, if left

unspayed, she will make every attempt to escape outdoors, vocalize and in general, be a cat on a mission. With both male and female cats, failure to spay or neuter may also increase their chances of certain cancers.

Allowing Your Cat to Roam

Whether to allow a cat outdoors at all is a controversial topic. My opinion is cats are safer indoors and you can create a stimulating environment inside that will provide all the entertainment, enrichment and fun a cat needs while keeping her safe. Letting your cat outdoors to roam the neighborhood puts her at risk for disease, injury, fighting, poisoning, abuse, parasites, getting lost, stolen or hit by a car.



No Identification

If you don't have identification on your cat you stand a very low chance of ever getting her back if she gets lost. While the common form of identification is an ID tag on a collar, the safest method is to have your cat microchipped. This is a small chip injected under the skin that contains your contact information. Veterinary clinics and shelters have the handheld scanners used to read these chips. Microchipping can be done at your veterinary clinic. It's a very quick process.

Not Taking the Time to Train Your Cat

If you've lived with cats in the past and you shudder to think of the memories of trying to get them to the veterinarian without getting scratched or bitten, then hopefully you now realize how important it is to start training your cat from the very beginning. Spend time getting your cat comfortable with being in a carrier, car travel, being handled, etc. It will be much easier when it comes time for the trip to the veterinarian's office. Additionally, take the time now to train your cat regarding her environment. Is she allowed on the kitchen counter? If not, get started training her to where she can and can't go. If you don't train her and then just end up punishing her when she does something you don't like it's truly unfair to the cat. Be consistent and do appropriate, positive training from the very beginning.

Poor Litter Box Maintenance

You don't want to use a dirty bathroom. Your cat doesn't want to either. The most common reason people call my office with a cat behavior problem is because kitty isn't using the litter box. In many cases the reason is because the human family members aren't keeping the box clean enough. Make sure you provide your cat with a litter box that is the right size, filled with the type of litter most appealing to her, locate the box in a convenient spot (for kitty) and keep it clean! Scoop at least twice a day.

Declawing

Don't put your furniture ahead of the emotional and physical health of your cat. Declawing is essentially 10 amputations. It would be the equivalent of having your fingers amputated at the first joint. Your cat's claws are a vital part of her physical and emotional health. Scratching serves multiple vital functions in a cat's life. If you take the time to understand how this instinct works and why it's beneficial for a cat, you'll realize how inhumane it is to declaw.



Not buying the Right Scratching Post

If you bought the cute little carpet-covered scratching post from your local pet product store you're going to be very disappointed because the cat will prefer your furniture to that useless object. Cats need to scratch on a rough material. The post also needs to be tall and sturdy. Do your homework and buy (or make) a scratching post a cat can lean her full weight against and get a good scratch and full body stretch.

Failure to Pay Attention to Behavior

A cat is a creature of habit. When she changes her behavior it can be an indication of a potential medical problem or the reaction to a stress trigger. If your cat's litter box habits have changed, her food or water intake has changed, activity level is different, etc., view it as a potential red flag that something isn't right. Contact your veterinarian to make sure there isn't an underlying medical condition. If kitty gets a clean bill of health then begin an investigation to see what is going on in the environment that might be causing anxiety.

Failure to Prepare Your Cat for Changes

Whether it's a move to a new house, a pregnancy, adding another pet, or renovation, it can be very scary for your cat to suddenly find herself in an unfamiliar situation. Take the time to ease your cat through changes. For example, if you're expecting a baby, take time now to help your cat adjust to the changes taking place in the household. If you're adding to the cat household, do a gradual, positive introduction. Don't shock the cats by tossing them in together with the expectation that they'll "work it out."



Punishment

Cats don't misbehave out of spite. If you think your cat is doing something wrong in a deliberate attempt to make you mad you are mistaken. Animals exhibit behaviors that serve a purpose. They're trying to solve a problem in the best way they know how. If you punish your cat by hitting, yelling, rubbing her nose in her mess, putting her in time-out, or any other method you may think of, all you'll succeed in doing is to make her afraid of you. Take the time to figure out the true cause of the cat's behavior (i.e. what's the pay-off?) and then create an option that will work for both of you. Punishment is inhumane and counter-productive.

No Environmental Enrichment

A cat is a hunter and she needs stimulation and the opportunity for discovery. Many behavior problems are the result of a boring environment. Your cat needs interactive playtime, solo play, places to scratch, cozy hideaways for napping, elevated areas for climbing and perching, and time with YOU.

Want More Information?

For comprehensive information on raising a well-adjusted cat and not a sour puss, refer to the book Think Like a Cat.

Information provided at: <http://www.catbehaviorassociates.com/common-mistakes-made-by-new-cat-parents/>



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