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STRENGTHENING THE HUMAN – ANIMAL CONNECTION



Feline Social System

Cats may not be as overtly social as dogs and humans, but they do form attachments to and relationships with other cats (and other animals) as well as humans. Understanding the modern housecat’s heritage allows us to appreciate why cats have the reputation for being loners.

The ancestor of our modern housecats is *Felis sylvestris libyca*, the African Wildcat. These desert-dwelling felines first began their association with humans when humans began farming and storing grains. Grain storage attracted rodents and the rodents attracted the cats. This association may date back as far as 12,000 years ago. Once humans realized the value of having cats around to protect their crops, the domestication process was underway.

The African Wildcat was, and still is a loner when it comes to hunting, but they can and do live in groups if resources are abundant. Thus, they are what’s called facultatively social. Their social system is based on the Mother cat and her young. When resources are abundant, females will live together and raise their kittens. This allows some of them to go off and hunt while others stay behind to protect the young.

Since cats are solitary hunters, they have no need for an elaborate social hierarchy, nor a huge repertoire of signals to communicate with each other, as is seen in wolf packs (and thus, dogs as well). These hierarchies are necessary to resolve conflict within the pack without having to resort to aggression. Cats, on the other hand resolve/prevent aggressive confrontation with other cats by elaborately marking their “territory”. Their territory is the area in which they hunt. Within this territory is their “home base” or the area where they spend the bulk of their time (sleeping, sunning themselves, etc). Depending on the abundance of the resources in any given area, several “familiar” cats will share the territory for hunting **but not at the same time**. As one cat uses the area, it scent marks by rubbing its paws and claws on objects (e.g. trees), rubbing their faces, hips and tails on objects, as well as marking with urine and feces. These are powerful olfactory signals that the area is being used and that other



“familiar” cats should wait their turn. Even though familiar cats are willing to share a territory, unfamiliar cats are aggressively driven out of the territory.

So, what does this mean for our modern housecats? Are we destined to have just one cat in our home in order to have peace? Not at all. We can, in fact, be successful housing more than one cat under our roof. Studies have shown that, when adding a cat to a home, neither age, sex or size (of the cat, of the house, of the number of cats already there) matters in regards to success of the introduction. Only two things really matter – the length of time the cats are together, and the individual personalities of the cats.

The house will be their “territory” (although some cats consider what they can see out the windows as their territory as well). Within this territory each cat will carve out their own private space as their “home base”. It is in this area that they take their naps, look out their favorite window, sun themselves, etc. Being knowledgeable about cats’ social structure helps us to successfully house more than one cat. We know that cats will share their territory with other familiar cats. *The longer a “new” cat has been in the house, the more likely the resident cat will consider it “familiar”.* Behavior specialists agree that the magic number is six months. It is at this point that cats begin to show acceptance behaviors and eliminate aggression. Since unfamiliar cats are instinctually driven out of a cat’s territory it would be unwise to bring in a new cat and plunk it down in the house. Having a stranger invade one’s territory can cause fear, anxiety and stress to not only the resident cat but the new cat as well. *(Please refer to the handout on introducing a new cat to a home).* Making use of vertical space is also important in a multi-cat household. Providing climbing and perching areas may allow each cat the opportunity to prevent conflicts, and display less anxiety.

Understanding the social system of cats can also help us decide where litter boxes should be located. The resident cat’s litter box or boxes should be left in place, but the newcomer should have access to a box that doesn’t involve having to invade the resident cat’s “home base” area. It is not uncommon for the resident cat to guard the existing litter boxes. They are certainly not above ambushing the newcomer as it uses the litter box. Since the act of eliminating (either urine or feces) is a very vulnerable time they prefer to do “the act” in private. They prefer a quiet place in which they can see an approach from the other cat/cats and from which they have an easy escape route.

Successful merging of cats within a home consists of the following:

1. Slow and careful introduction (for more information see handout on How to Introduce a cat to a home with an existing cat/cats)
2. Multiple litter boxes (at least one per cat, plus one more) in a variety of locations including opposite ends of the home and on each level for multilevel homes.
3. Separate areas for feeding.
4. Plenty of options for resting and observing the area (cat towers, etc)
5. Positive reinforcement for acting appropriately in the form of praise, attention, and treats in the presence of the other cat.