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STRENGTHENING THE HUMAN – ANIMAL CONNECTION



Life With Felines – A Survival Guide for Cat Owners

Whether you are a novice or a long-time cat owner, the following tips will help ensure a long-lasting, enjoyable, and healthy relationship between the felines and the humans in your household. Just as us humans have certain house rules which we expect our cats to honor, so, too, do cats. The beginning of a beautiful relationship with your cat starts with you, the human, understanding the cat's needs and wants. Keep in mind, however, that this translates, in cat language, to "needs and needs". You may think I'm kidding but, sadly, I'm not. Remember the saying, "If mama ain't happy, ain't nobody happy" It should be *If kitty ain't happy, ain't nobody happy!*

Here's what they want (umm, I mean, *need*):

- Food available for snacking any time of the day or night.
- Fresh, clean water in shallow dishes, filled all the way to the top
- Things to climb – the higher and more levels the better
- Things to scratch – displayed in prominent locations throughout the house
- Plenty of litter boxes – preferably with unscented, scoopable litter, on each level of the house
- Plenty of fun toys – especially the interactive type so they can feel like they are really hunting!
- Plenty of access to windows so they can be entertained by prey-type critters
- A sunny patch in which to lounge away the vast majority of the day

Now we'll explore some of these in a little more detail because it is important that you humans get it right. Don't get me wrong – cats make terrific pets. They are cute, loving, entertaining little fur balls. They add a lot to our lives but it worth noting that if they aren't provided with all of the things they want, they will improvise and this may not fit with the human set of house rules.

Nothing hurts a cat-human relationship faster than inappropriate elimination (by this I mean urinating and defecating in locations other than the litter box), so we'll start here. Studies show that cats prefer **scoopable** litter that is **unscented**. The depth of the litter is important too. Aim for 2 inches of litter in the box. As for location – choose quiet locations, free from a lot of



human foot traffic, and away from noisy appliances (washing machines, for example). Cats also like locations that allow them to be able to see what's coming and that allow for quick escapes. This is especially true for multi-cat households. It is also preferable to have at least one box on each level of your home. As for cleanliness – the cleaner the better. Scoop boxes **at least** once a day. Completely empty and wash boxes about every 3-4 weeks. Think back to the last time you had to use a nasty public restroom and had to hold your breath while hovering over a dirty seat. That's how cats feel about using dirty litter boxes. The number of boxes is important too. It is best to have one box per cat plus one more. Some cats like to urinate in one box and defecate in another. I know this seems like a lot of rules but failure to follow them could result in a cat that uses the laundry pile or throw rugs, instead of the litter box. So, set yourself and your cat up for success by following these rules. One more thing, avoid any citrus or floral odors near the boxes – most cats detest these smells. On that note, I would avoid any odor eliminating products at all, anywhere near the boxes.

Next, let's explore the concept of scratching/clawing. Scratching inanimate objects, be they horizontal or vertical, is normal, natural cat behavior. Expecting them to just learn to *not do it* is like trying to teach a child to not touch any toys, *ever*. To a cat, scratching/clawing objects serves multiple purposes. They are territorial little creatures and scratching objects (tree, couch, carpet, etc) not only leaves a visual marker that the area belongs to them, but also a scent mark to tell other felines that the area is theirs. Cats have scent glands on the bottoms of their feet. They also have scent glands on their faces and hip/tail area – so this is why they rub on everything, including their humans. Even though we humans can't smell it, other cats surely can. It needs to be refreshed often which explains why cats scratch on objects as part of their daily existence. You may wonder why the corner of the couch, that faces into the room, is the place they often choose to scratch. The fact that it is a spot that everyone can see is exactly the cat's point. With this in mind, the best place to put a scratching post is right where everyone can see it. Remember, the entire house is the cat's territory so having several scratching posts scattered around the home is ideal. The texture is important to the cat. They prefer materials that they can tear through as opposed to those that their claws get stuck in. So, when buying or making a scratching post for your cat pick a texture they will like. Most commercial scratching posts are covered with carpet and this is unfortunate because many cats prefer other textures. Their claws can't tear nicely through carpet. Sisal rope-wrapped posts are my personal favorite (although they also like cardboard). These shred nicely. Marking their territory isn't the only reason they scratch, however. If you have ever seen a cat scratching a tree trunk, you probably noticed that the cat stretched high up on the tree. It is a good way to stretch their muscles (which probably explains why mine often do it just after getting up from a nap). I prefer posts that are tall – taller than the cat can reach when they stand up on their hind feet to scratch. It also removes the old sheathes that shed from the claws as they grow. Plus it just feels good. They will sometimes do it as part of play as they race around the house.

(Note: you can make your own scratching posts by firmly anchoring a 3- 3 ½ foot fence-type post to a large square wooden base – big enough to be stable and not fall over. Then wrap the post with sisal rope – can attach it with fencing staples)

When they are not sleeping, they can be energetic pets, although you may look at your little couch potato feline and think, “yeh, right!” It is important to encourage your cat to exercise daily. Not only will it help them stay trim but it is a great way for the humans to bond with their



cats. Some cats will play with toys by themselves, batting around a foam rubber ball. For others, a simple, small, wadded up piece of paper will suffice. Many cats, however, prefer a more interactive type of play. Knowing that cats are master predators will help you design ways to play with your cat. Many cats love chasing laser lights all around the floor. These are a cheap, fun way to interact with your cat. They also love “anything” on the end of a string that’s attached to a pole. They’ll stalk, chase, and pounce their way around the room as long as you keep the object in motion. Some will even leap into the air to catch the “prey”.

As for food, you really do get what you pay for. Your cat’s health is influenced by the quality of their diet. There are a dizzying number of brands available so it is wise to educate yourself a bit, in order to pick out a healthy choice for your cat. Your veterinarian can be a great resource for information on diets. It is best to measure the proper amount of food each day for your cat. This ensures that they get fresh food each day (rather than left-over’s from the day before) and also limits the amount of calories they take in. The food label (on dry kibble bags) should have a feeding table to use as a guide. Your veterinarian can advise you as to how many calories your cat should eat each day to stay lean and healthy. If your bag or can of food does not list calories, you can call the manufacturer’s number to get this information. Most cats are nibblers – that is they eat many small snacks throughout the day and this is fine.

I’m often asked about an indoor lifestyle versus an outdoor lifestyle for cats. The statistics pretty much say it all. Outdoor cats have an average lifespan of 3 years, while their indoor counterparts live an average of 13 years. Diseases, injuries, and predators are often the reason an outdoor cat’s life is cut short. Indoor cats can have a very fulfilling life with plenty of attention, play-time, and love. I am also an advocate of supervised outdoor exposure for cats. There are outdoor play-yards that can be purchased for cats and these are a fun and safe way for cats to get some fresh air and mental stimulation. An online search or a visit to a larger pet store will offer many nice choices. Don’t forget flea control if you choose any type of outdoor exposure for your cat, as well as a heartworm preventative. However, remember that mosquitoes do get into the house so I recommend using a heartworm preventative monthly even for indoor cats. As for fleas, an indoor cat can still get fleas if other animals in the home go in and out (family dog) so it is always best to protect all of your pets during flea season.

Now that you are armed with the information you need to make your cat a happy member of the family, go ahead and spend some quality time with your feline friend.

As for the human house rules.....that’s a whole different handout.

