Supporting the Peaceable Kingdom
by Janet Velenovsky, CPDT

The APPMA (American Pet Products Manufacturers Association) reports there are 74 million pet dogs in American households. That’s a lot of canine best friends! Guess what? The same source reports there are 90 million pet cats in America. Wow! Why is this important to dog trainers? Why are cats being discussed in The APDT Chronicle of the Dog?

Think about it this way. There are a lot of households where dogs and cats need to exist peaceably together. Those owners often have questions about avoiding conflict while meeting the needs of each pet. Therefore, it pays for each of us family dog trainers to know at least a little bit about dealing with “man’s other best friend.” If you are called upon to help with family pet training, ignoring this other population of pets would be similar to trying to deal with the dynamics of the family while ignoring the children or the spouse.

How many times have you been asked by a new puppy owner, “So, how do I keep him from chasing the cat?” or “How do I keep my puppy out of the cat’s litter box?”

On the surface, both questions sound like dog management issues. True, each has a management component, but giving really good advice for the first question should include a healthy dose of information on getting the cat accustomed to the puppy’s presence. After all, a cat that doesn’t immediately run from the puppy is less likely to invite chasing. Keep in mind, too, that, if the chasing “harassment” is not controlled, there is a strong possibility that the stress on the cat could result in physical or behavioral problems.

Regarding the second question, positioning the litter box to keep the dog away must not result in making it inhospitable to the cat or inappropriate elimination may occur. The dog trainer with some understanding of cat behavior is going to provide more complete solutions for their clients.

Introductions

As with so many things in life, planning ahead and getting started on the right foot can greatly reduce future problems. If you have the chance to help the owners make a good choice in pet selection—great! Then, help them prepare for the introduction by instilling impulse control exercises and basic obedience behaviors in the dog, followed by a structured, slow, careful introduction of the pets, relying heavily on classical conditioning through yummy treats and fun activities. Dog Appeasing Pheromone (DAP)™ and Feliway™ may be helpful through this process.

Many owners want to rush the introduction process. Spending a week or two to desensitize and countercondition cat/dog interactions can seem to them like a slow process, but it is well worth the investment of time. In fact, it can take up to six months to normalize the relationships. Many owners expect that if the pets aren’t “friends” in the first week that it will never happen. We can help by managing their expectations and normalizing a lot of the behavior of each species throughout the process.

If, as most often happens, you are called in to “fix” an introduction gone wrong, your job may be a bit harder. Imagine yourself in a situation where someone you don’t know and didn’t agree to share space with suddenly moves into your house. What might have had some chance of success under diplomatic and careful negotiation would be fraught with anger, anxiety, and fear.

Cat Behavior: The Basics

What basic cat behavior information should you know? The most often reported cat behavior problems include litter box issues, fear or territorial aggression directed toward other pets, redirected aggression toward humans, and destruction of property by marking or clawing. Many of these might be initiated or exacerbated by the introduction of new dogs or other pets into the household.

Cats are very territorial animals (Case, 2002; Beaver, 2003; Overall, 1997; Landsberg, Hunthausen, and Ackerman, 2003). They use scent to leave their messages around their living spaces to mark them as...
“owned.” This might include facial rubbing and scratching, or may escalate to urine spraying and leaving feces as “markers,” especially during the introduction of new pets. Obviously, spraying and feces on the floor are likely to be upsetting to the owners. Urination outside the litter box can result when a cat isn’t comfortable getting to his “bathroom.” It could also be part of generalized anxiety or might indicate a medical problem.

The rule of thumb is to always provide at least one litter box per cat, plus one. Because of a cat’s territoriality, you do not want the boxes to be a scarce resource. The boxes should be easily accessible and convenient for the cat to use. It is important that cats feel they can comfortably enter and leave the litter area without danger of confrontation or attack (from dogs, other cats, or even kids!). Noisy or high-traffic areas may also be unsuitable for shy or timid cats, resulting in the cats finding more hospitable places to relieve themselves.

Studies by veterinary behaviorists have shown cats have a general preference for roomy litter boxes with one to three inches of a soft sandy or pebble type litter, with no lid to the box and no heavy perfumes to the litter. (Nielson, 2001) Frequent, regular cleaning is essential. These studies recommend owners refrain from buying “whatever’s on sale,” as changing litter too often can result in avoidance of the litter box. Of course, “your mileage may vary,” as not all cats have the same tastes. These are only guidelines; chronic litter box problems may require a consult with a veterinarian to rule out medical issues.

For multiple cat households, it may be wise to provide multiple feeding places too. This helps timid cats who might not feel comfortable sidling up next to a more confident cat at one bowl at dinner-time.

Don’t forget that the owners are an important resource to all the household pets too. While many of us love opening our homes to multiple pets, we need to be sure we can provide adequate attention for each animal.

Cats often “time-share” their favorite people and places. A cat that likes to languish in the morning sun in the kitchen may readily relinquish the spot to other cats or dogs later in the day. Though cats are not dependent upon social interaction generally for their survival, domestic cats often develop a social hierarchy with other cats or with dogs, though the relationships tend to be flexible depending upon context. (Beaver, 2003; Overall, 1997)

Cats are fond of using vertical space for retreating from stressful situations, surveying their worlds, and safe napping. Offering cats perches on bookshelves, window sills, balconies, tops of stairs with baby gates at the bottom, or “cat trees” (carpeted structures with multiple levels) can make use of normally unused space that will provide safe places for avoiding that pesky puppy until he can be trained not to chase.

If you have ever had the pleasure of taking the average housecat to a veterinary visit, you may be aware that cats can escalate from calm to terrified in no time. Once highly aroused, it can take hours for some cats to return to a calm state. This kind of arousal can also occur when an indoor cat observes an unfamiliar cat out a window, or is startled by loud or unusual noises. Redirected aggression toward humans or other animals often happens in this kind of situation. When the owner or another animal comes into contact with the aroused cat, it may lash out.

When a cat is overly aroused, it is best to give it time by itself to recover. As long as it is safe, it is best to allow the cat to hide under the bed or behind the furniture as it wishes. After some quiet time—if the initial stressor is gone or reduced—most cats will emerge. This might be a good time for some wand or “fishing pole” or string play. Play can be a great reliever of stress, but be sure to use something that keeps space between your skin and the cat’s claws and teeth until you are sure the cat has calmed down.

Cat behavior specialists agree that most indoor housecats are under-socialized and could benefit greatly from enrichment opportunities in their environment. (American Association of Feline Practitioners - AAFP) In addition to lots of catnip, strings, and other available toys, they recommend finding ways to encourage kitties to work for their food, to train cats to target and do tricks, and even try clicker training for helping kitty accept handling, grooming, and other challenging interactions.

You may have heard about a movement to offer kitten socialization classes to take advantage of a cat’s early learning period, which—at three to eight weeks—occurs much earlier than that of our canine companions. Kittens do continue learning social skills through 16 weeks, but much of their socialization to people may happen long before the owner adopts!
Kitten Kindy™ is a very successful early socialization class concept created by veterinary behaviorist Kirstie Seksel in Australia (see www.fecava.org/files/ejcap/159.pdf). Many shelters, trainers and veterinarians here in the US are beginning to offer similar educational opportunities. Introducing cats to more novel experiences and a variety of situations early in life makes veterinary office visits, new pets, children, and other exhilarating experiences easier for the cat as an adult, just as it does for dogs.

Learning Resources

Learning about cat behavior can be just as interesting—and time-consuming—as dog behavior. One of my favorite books for understanding cats is Roger Tabor’s Cat Behavior: A Complete Guide to Understanding How Your Cat Works (1998). Tabor takes time to not only discuss cat behavior, but details feline anatomy and describes how that affects or enhances the behavior.

Pamela Johnson-Bennett has written several wonderful books that not only help you understand cat behavior, but make for enjoyable reading as well. Dr. Nicholas Dodman’s book, The Cat Who Cried for Help (1997) is also a very entertaining and enlightening book.

You can find excellent references online, such as the Denver Dumb Friends League (www.ddfl.org), Pets For Life (www.petsforlife.org), the San Francisco SPCA (www.sfspca.org), and Animal Behavior Associates (www.animalbehaviorassociates.com.)

The AAFP offers a downloadable PDF document called Feline Behavior Guidelines on their Web site (www.aafponline.org). While directed toward the veterinary community, it contains valuable information in a clear and easy-to-read format. Included are a chart of feline developmental periods, illustrations of body language, and a set of handouts you can share with clients.

The International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants (www.iaabc.org) has a division for cat behavior, and offers high-value educational opportunities with membership.

The Indoor Cat Initiative, www.vet.ohio-state.edu/indoorcat.htm, has some great information found about enrichment and cat behavior problems.

Kitten Kindy™ comes from Dr. Kersti Seksel’s book Training Your Cat. An online source for information is www.fecava.org/files/ejcap/159.pdf.

Think about learning a new “language” to broaden your knowledge and become more valuable to your client owners. Studying cats and their interactions with canines offers great challenges and rewards.

Janet Velenovsky, CPDT, lives with her husband, Scott, in their (mostly) peaceable kingdom of three cats (Cally, Speedy, and Griffin) and three dogs (Golden Retrievers Kaizen and Piper, and Border Collie/Papillon mix, Keiko) in Montpelier, VA. Janet is the Training & Behavior Education Specialist for Premier Pet Products. In addition to her membership in APDT, Janet belongs to IAABC, received her Counseling Certificate from the Academy for Dog Trainers at the SFSPCA, attended the DOGS! Behavior Modification course at Purdue University, and volunteers regularly with HOPE Animal-Assisted Crisis Response and local dog therapy organizations. Janet also teaches group classes at All Dog Playskool in Richmond and offers private behavior consultations for dog and cat owners.

References


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