Solutions for Serious Problems

Many cats are abandoned because of bad behavior. Here’s what to do before you (or someone you know) is at their wit’s end.

By Pat Miller

My two cats are perfect. Well, Gewurztraminer misses the litter box from time to time, and Jackson coughs up hairballs tinged with green from the leaves of the houseplants he chews. Gewurtz can be a gregarious pest, hopping up on the dining room table when we have guests for dinner, and sitting in the middle of the newspaper when we’re trying to read.

Jackson, on the other hand, is disturbingly reclusive, and has been ever since he was a four-week-old feral kitten, despite our best efforts to socialize him. When he does grace us with his presence, it’s on his own terms. He may deign to sit on our laps, but he may not. Despite these behavior quirks that make them the unique individuals that they are, they are perfect because we love them.

Unfortunately, not all cat owners are as tolerant. (We realize that WCJ readers represent the upper echelon of cat owners, so use this article to help your less cat-savvy friends—and their cats—if necessary!) “Moving” is the most common reason given by owners surrendering their cats to animal shelters. However, millions of committed cat owners do take their feline friends with them when they move.

What’s the difference between the owner who wouldn’t dream of leaving Mouser out of the moving plans, and the one who leaves him behind? More often than not, camouflaged behind “moving, can’t keep,” are behavioral reasons that explain why the owner is choosing not to bring Mouser along. The same owner who is willing to leave Mouser behind when the family moves is just as likely to get fed up with Mouser’s scratching on the furniture or his sloppy litter box habits, even if a move is not in the offing. Mouser still ends up surrendered to a shelter, or worse, abandoned.

Unwanted feline behaviors are a challenge, partly because many of them are quite natural for Mouser—he sees nothing wrong with sharpening his claws on the brand new stereo speakers. Cats have a reputation for being notoriously hard to train, in large part because the force-based training model we have used with dogs for decades just doesn’t work with cats.

Behavior problems are a primary cause of the euthanasia of some six to eight million unwanted dogs and cats at animal shelters every year—not to mention the additional thousands of cats who are abandoned by their owners to starve, be eaten by predators, succumb to terminal diseases, get shot or poisoned, die under the wheels of a car, or eke out a meager existence in a feral colony.

Luckily for cats and their owners, our training model has changed. Advances in applied behavioral science have brought us better training methods that do work with cats; methods that rely on positive reinforcement and reward—not punishment—to convince our furry friends to behave. Cats, particularly resistant to the use of force and punishment, respond beautifully to this kinder, gentler training method. A better understanding of cats has also enabled us to develop better behavior management tools that make it easier for us to live with behaviors that we can’t change.

As with most behaviors, prevention is better than after-the-fact cures. Let’s take a look at several “extreme” cat behaviors that are likely to result in Mouser landing behind bars at his local animal shelter—and see how we can prevent, change or manage them and thus perhaps keep Mouser, and thousands of cats like him, in their homes for life.

The Litter Bug

One of the really great things about...
cats is their natural instinct to use a litter box. While puppy owners tear their hair out over housetraining for months, we can plop our baby cat in a clean litter box and have the satisfaction of seeing her use it the first time, every time. So how does this instinct go awry? Why do we have so many cats with litter box problems?

There are several reasons. Most of them have to do with us looking at litter boxes from a human perspective rather than a feline one. We humans want to put the boxes as far away as possible, completely enclosed to minimize the smell, and use perfumed litters to cover up that awful odor of fresh cat poop. Of course, then we have the out-of-sight, out-of-mind problem—the better we hide the litter box, the easier it is to avoid cleaning it regularly.

Mouser, who started out with good litter box intentions, gets sloppy because: A) The box is too far away; B) The hood that keeps the offensive odors from permeating the house also keeps the odors in the box (which is offensive to Mouser); C) The perfumes that we think make the litter box smell better are overwhelmingly strong to Mouser's sensitive nose (he can't stand them); D) When the box isn't cleaned regularly, Mouser goes in search of a cleaner toilet.

Other reasons for litter box failure include conflicts with other cats in the home, a previous alternative substrate preference (maybe Mouser was raised in a barn and learned to eliminate in straw) and traumatic experiences in or near the box—a falling pile of laundry, attack from another household pet, or a negative association with the box resulting from punishment for a litter box indiscretion.

Here are the ten commandments for Extreme Litter Box Failure:

1. Make sure the box is located in a safe, easily accessible spot. Take a cat's-eye view to be sure nothing will startle Mouser when he is in it—the dog sailing through the doggie door, the dishwasher suddenly switching cycles, a blast from Junior's stereo speakers...It doesn't take many repetitions of those to convince Mouser that the litter box is a bad place.

2. Make sure the litter box is cleaned regularly—twice a day, if necessary. Alternatively, supply several litter boxes so there is always a clean one available for a discriminating Mouser to use. Then be sure to clean those regularly. Avoid using strong-smelling cleaners when you wash the box—regular rinsing with hot water is usually sufficient. For the occasional heavy-duty cleaning with cleaners, give the box plenty of time to air out before refilling it.

3. Conduct your own scientific experiment. Purchase small quantities of several different types of litter (including potting soil and sandbox sand), and several litter boxes. Fill each box (1-2") with a different kind of litter, and see which one(s) Mouser likes best. Then use his favorite. (You can donate excess litter and litter boxes to your local animal shelter.)

4. Have Mouser checked by a veterinarian. If he has a urinary tract infection, loose stools, or is loaded with parasites, it may be impossible for him to get to the litter box in time.

5. Put the litter box on a surface that is easy to clean, such as a vinyl floor, so that if Mouser does miss the box due to poor aim, the result is easy to clean up and you won't have to replace carpeting. If this is happening with your cat, try a bigger litter box. He just might not fit in the one you have!

6. Put litter boxes in several locations throughout the house, so that Mouser can always find one nearby when nature calls.

7. Be sure to clean thoroughly any spot where Mouser has had an accident. Use an enzyme-based cleaner (such as Nature's Miracle) to be sure to eliminate any odors that might be undetectable to us but still very evident to Mouser's superior olfactory senses. If he has a "regular" spot that he likes, try putting his food and water there—most animals don't want to soil their dining area—or cover the spot with a plant or table to block his access to it.

8. If Mouser is still declining to use his box, restrict him to a small room, such as a bathroom, where his choices are limited. If that's still too much space, try a large dog crate. When he is using the box reliably in a limited space, gradually increase his freedom, making sure he always has easy access to his box(es).

9. Never punish him in or near his litter box. He will associate the punishment with the box and dislike it even more. If you "catch him in the act," gently interrupt him with a pleasant "Oops!" and pick him up. Just as gently, place him in the small room with his clean litterbox and close the door.

10. If you're not having success on your own, you may need to call in a behavior consultant who can evaluate the environment and help you figure out why Mouser is having a problem. The vast majority of litter box problems are resolved by keeping the box cleaner, changing the type of litter, and/or changing the location of the box.
Scratching the Surface
Cats scratch because they have claws. My personal opinion is—if you don’t want claws, don’t get a cat. If you do get a cat, be prepared to do the training and behavior management necessary to prevent damage to items that you value highly. Here are some suggestions for dealing with Extreme Cat Scratching:

1. Supply your cat with several different surfaces for scratching. There are commercial scratching posts made of from sisal, cardboard, wood, and carpeting. If you have your eye on a carpeted post, look for one that uses a significantly different kind of carpeting than you have on your floors. Sprinkle catnip or honeysuckle on the post to encourage your cat’s interest, or hang a mylar crinkle-ball, catnip toy, or Cat Dancer just above the post to get his paws and claws moving.

2. Place tempting targets out of Mouser’s reach, and make wise purchases of new household furnishings. Hang speakers on the wall, or put them on a high shelf. Buy chairs and sofas made of materials that don’t invite cat claws, or that don’t show cat claw damage easily. Leather and vinyl are out, as are rough, nubby materials that just beg to be clawed.

3. Use mild aversives to deter clawing on inappropriate surfaces. Our favorites are double-stick tape, and the plastic chair mat material that has hard little points on one side. Attached pointy-side out, they are very effective scratch-deterrents.

4. Manage Mouser’s behavior by confining him to “safe” rooms when you aren’t around to gently intervene in the event of inappropriate scratching. When you are around to intervene, interrupt Mouser’s clawing with a pleasant “Oops!” pick him up and take him to his scratching post. Refresh the catnip on the post to catch his attention there, or jiggle the toy hanging over the post.

5. Keep his nails trimmed with a nail clipper. Our cats scratch only very rarely, but when they do it is inevitably time to clip claws. A few snips, and the clawing screeches to a halt. If you aren’t sure how to clip kitty nails, ask your vet to show you.

6. If all else fails, ask your veterinarian about “Soft Paws.” Soft Paws are colored nylon tips that cover your cat’s claws and prevent damage from scratching. They need to be replaced every six to eight weeks.

Hey—the Spray!
Cat spray is inarguably nasty stuff. The most common offender is the unneutered male cat, although some females will also spray. Spraying is not a litter box problem—cats spray to mark their territory, most frequently because they are stressed. 

The easiest fix is—The Fix. Neutering and spaying will eliminate the overwhelming majority of spraying behavior, even in older cats. If sterilization doesn’t stop Mouser’s spraying, you will need to figure out what it is that is causing him excessive stress, and eliminate the stressor. Often the stressor is the presence of other cats—either too many within the home, or outdoor cats that Mouser can see from his picture window (we are assuming that Mouser is being kept safely indoors, where he belongs).

If you have too many cats in your home, you do, indeed, have a dilemma. You may be able to divide the house into territories, and keep doors closed to prevent spray-inducing trespass into Mouser’s territory. Or perhaps you can get creative and develop new cat space by utilizing the garage, attic, basement, or building enclosed cat spaces outdoors.

Outdoor cat intruders are a different story. You may be able to cover the windows so Mouser can’t see out and be stressed by the intruders’ presence. However, I know how much my cats enjoy basking in sunbeams and watching the outside world—I would hate to take that away from them.

There are motion-detectors in many pet supply stores and catalogs that attach to your hose and spray water when tripped by a trespasser. These can be very effective at keeping unwanted felines out of your yard and out of Mouser’s view. If you know who owns the other cats, you can contact the owners and ask them to keep their furry friends at home, although this rarely works. Most people who let their cats outdoors are not easily convinced to keep them in. Finally, you may need to contact your local animal services department and ask them for help in using humane traps to remove the stray and feral cats in your neighborhood that are making Mouser’s life (and yours!) miserable.

Tony the TiGrrrrrrrrr
Cat bites and scratches are no laughing matter. Cat bites get infected at the drop of a hat, and can cause permanent disability if not treated promptly. An aggressive cat is no fun
to have around. Anyone who has ever made the mistake of trying to punish a cat for being aggressive knows full well that punishment just makes aggression worse.

If you are not comfortable implementing the suggestions below for working with an aggressive cat, contact a qualified behavior consultant who can help you. (Note: Aggression can be a sign of a medical problem, especially in a cat who was previously friendly. Any animal who exhibits a sudden or unusual behavior change should be examined by a veterinarian for medical causes.)

Some cats exhibit “affection aggression.” Mouser is lying happily on your lap, purring, and seems to be enjoying your long, soothing strokes along his side. Then, the tip of his tail begins to twitch, and suddenly he rolls on his back, grabs your hand with his teeth and front paws, and disembowels your wrist with his razor-sharp hind claws, leaving deep bloody gouges in your skin. This behavior is an easy fix. You need to be more aware of Mouser’s level of arousal, and stop your petting before he erupts. In this scenario, the twitching tail was your clue that it was time to stop. You may feel your cat get a little tense, he may stop purring, or his expression may change from sleepy and content to alert. These are cues to stop the petting for a while, or risk the consequences.

True aggression is another matter. A truly aggressive cat needs to be worked with very carefully, using desensitization and counter-conditioning to gradually change his perception of humans as threatening. At no time during a desensitization program should you try to forcibly restrain your cat to make him accept being held or petted. It won’t work.

It is critically important to confine the aggressive cat to a safe place, such as a spare room, and make all interactions with him pleasant and positive. Whenever you enter the room, carry his favorite feline treats and sprinkle them very liberally on the floor around you. We want your presence to reliably predict “treats raining from the heavens.” Sit in the cat’s room and read a book, paying no attention to him other than generously dropping treats. End each session before he eats his fill of yummies—always leave him wanting more.

In time, you should start to see an attitude change—Mouser will begin to look forward to your presence, perhaps even greet you at his door with a trill of anticipation. If he hasn’t already, begin encouraging him to engage in friendly bodily contact with you, by luring him closer with treats, inviting him to sit on your lap, and eventually petting him gently, if you can. Watch closely for any signs of tension, and cease petting if you see it. If he does try to bite or scratch, just give him a pleasant “Oops!” and remove yourself from the room for at least ten minutes.

Now that he thinks your presence is a good thing and he wants you to be there, we can teach him that aggression makes a bad thing happen—it makes you (and his favorite treats) go away. He will learn to be non-aggressive in order to keep the good stuff happening.

If Mouser is friendly most of the time, but occasionally has a bout of the nasties, try to figure out what his triggers are, and then avoid the triggers. If he chomps you when you try to move him off your lambswool sweater, instead of physically moving him, invite him off by dropping a few irresistibly tasty treats on the floor where he can smell them, or run the can opener in the kitchen (and then feed him a treat when he gets there). Similarly avoid other incidents of aggression by designing creative ways to get Mouser to do what you want voluntarily, rather than bodily forcing him to comply.

The Purrsonality Clash
Prevention is by far the best approach to the Extreme Personality Mismatch. No amount of training or counter-conditioning is going to change our reclusive Jackson into a lap cat, no matter how much I might have my heart set on having a warm furry body snuggling up on my legs on a cold winter night.

In order to avoid this problem, have a clear concept (or family agreement, if there are others involved) of what temperament you want your cat to have before you adopt her. Make a pledge that you won’t lose your heart to the first adorable fuzzy face you see, and don’t succumb to the sad little kitten who is hiding in the back of her cage. If you want a relaxed, friendly lap-cat, look for a relaxed friendly lap-cat or kitten.

If you want a playful, bold feline to play with your kids, look for a cat or kitten who is confident and curious, and eagerly pounces on a string toy. By the same token, if you don’t like cats in the middle of your newspaper, or want one who is sedate, look for a cat or kitten who is calmer, more aloof, and prefers to avoid intimacy.

And you need to keep in mind that you simply can’t change a cat’s basic personality. You are making a 15 to 20 year commitment to this intriguing creature—you might as well find the one who fits your own lifestyle and personality.