

Solving Problem Behaviors: The Process

Before you can create a solution, you need to know exactly what each owner considers a problem behavior to be. Some might not want their cats to jump up on their desks, while others will encourage their cats to leap up and provide a welcome break. Individual preferences will vary greatly.⁵⁵



Identify the ABCs

In order to solve a problem behavior, the first step needs to be identifying the ABCs: **A**ntecedent, **B**ehavior, **C**onsequence. In other words, you need to discover what is causing the behavior; discuss the behaviors' details; and determine the behavior's consequence(s).

Antecedent

An antecedent is a preceding event, condition or cause.⁵⁶ Figuring out what caused the problem behavior is essential to finding a solution. Depending on the situation and the problem behavior, you might: 1) discover multiple antecedents; 2) determine that cause is unclear or 3) decide it is an expression of an instinctive behavior.⁵⁷



The antecedent to a case of late-night vocalizing could be a number of things, such as a change in a household's composition, an abrupt schedule change and/or loss of a favored playmate.
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For example, a family's son moves out and takes his Chihuahua with him. After this, the cat begins to vocalize excessively during the night, disrupting the family's sleep. In this case, there are multiple possible precipitating factors, since both the son and dog have left the house.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Shaw, J. K., & Martin, D. (2015). *Canine and Feline Behavior for Veterinary Technicians and Nurses*. Ames, IA: John Wiley & Sons

⁵⁶ Definition of Antecedent. (2017). Merriam-Webster.com. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/antecedent>

⁵⁷ Shaw, J. K., & Martin, D. (2015). *Canine and Feline Behavior for Veterinary Technicians and Nurses*. Ames, IA: John Wiley & Sons

⁵⁸ Case, L. P., & MacAllister, B. (2009). *Canine and Feline Behavior and Training: A Complete Guide to Understanding our Two Best Friends*. Boston, MA, United States: Delmar Cengage Learning.

In another example, a cat begins scratching a new fabric-covered chair; however she is not scratching the leather couch. It is likely the cat is acting on her instinct to scratch and/or mark her territory.⁵⁹

Behavior

Discuss the details of the problem behavior, i.e., when, where and how, and make certain it is not caused by any underlying, unresolved medical issues.⁶⁰

In the previous example of excessive nighttime vocalization, the behavior's details are:

- When: at night
- Where: throughout the house
- How: meowing loudly

Note: Before creating a solution, you should advise the owners to take their cat to a veterinarian as some causes for excessive vocalization can be dementia or pain.⁶¹

For the scratching example, the details are:

- When: occasionally, but not always
- Where: the living room
- How: determined, she scratches with intent



When identifying the ABCs of a problem behavior, you will need to know as many details as possible, including when, where and how it is happening. In the case of the scratched chair, the details are, respectively: occasionally, in the living room, and with intent.
alexstepanov/Adobe Stock

⁵⁹ Johnson-Bennett, P. (2017). Furniture Scratching Explained. Cat Behavior Associates. <http://www.catbehaviorassociates.com/furniture-scratching/>

⁶⁰ Case, L. P., & MacAllister, B. (2009). Canine and Feline Behavior and Training: A Complete Guide to Understanding our Two Best Friends. Boston, MA, United States: Delmar Cengage Learning.

⁶¹ Landsberg, G. M., Hunthausen, W. L., Ackerman, L., & L. G. (2012). Behavior Problems of the Dog and Cat (3rd ed.). Oxford: W B Saunders Co.

Consequences

What are the consequences of the behavior? From the cat's perspective, what happens after the behavior occurs?⁶² When the cat meowed at night, someone would get up and tell her to be quiet, or give her some food to make her quiet. Her nightly meowing resulted in attention and/or food.⁶³

When the cat scratched the new chair, she satisfied her instinctual need. The consequences for her include marking her territory, removing the outermost layer of her claws and/or stretching her back muscles, as well as being yelled at by her owner.

Determine Motivation

What is the motivation driving a behavior? Cats will not perform a behavior out of spite, malice or revenge. Instead, they will perform a behavior because it is rewarding in some way.⁶⁴ In most cases, a behavior's consequences and motivation will overlap.

Some behaviors are self-rewarding—especially instinctive ones—such as scratching. Scratching allows cats to mark territory with their paws' scent glands, remove the outer layer of their claws, stretch their muscles, etc.⁶⁵



After identifying the ABCs, you next need to figure out a cat's motivation. For example, meowing during the night might enable a cat to get her owners' attention.
steffstarr/Adobe Stock

Vocalizing excessively at night allows a cat to gain attention, food, or both. This made the behavior of meowing at night rewarding.⁶⁶

⁶² Shaw, J. K., & Martin, D. (2015). *Canine and Feline Behavior for Veterinary Technicians and Nurses*. Ames, IA: John Wiley & Sons

⁶³ Shaw, J. K., & Martin, D. (2015). *Canine and Feline Behavior for Veterinary Technicians and Nurses*. Ames, IA: John Wiley & Sons

⁶⁴ Shaw, J. K., & Martin, D. (2015). *Canine and Feline Behavior for Veterinary Technicians and Nurses*. Ames, IA: John Wiley & Sons

⁶⁵ Johnson-Bennett, P. (2017). Furniture Scratching Explained. Cat Behavior Associates. <http://www.catbehaviorassociates.com/furniture-scratching/>

⁶⁶ Yin, S. (2009). *Low Stress Handling, Restraint and Behavior Modification of Dogs and Cats: Techniques for Developing Patients Who Love Their Visits*. Davis, CA: Cattedog Publishing

Management, Prevention and Solutions

You will need to determine if the behavior can be prevented and/or managed. In some cases, the behavior will still be present; however, it will no longer be invasive and/or destructive.⁶⁷ Excluding any underlying medical causes, a problem behavior will either be self-rewarding or human-rewarded.⁶⁸

Self-Rewarding Behaviors

To solve a self-rewarding behavior, owners must eliminate its rewarding aspect, and provide a more rewarding alternative.



Owners should apply double-side tape to make a cat's self-rewarding behavior of scratching a new chair much less satisfying. Image courtesy of Pioneer Pet

For the cat scratching the chair, her owners should apply double-sided (furniture safe) tape on it, which makes the behavior unpleasant and unrewarding. Next, the owners must place appropriate scratchers in a several locations, including territorially significant areas, such as regularly visited ones.⁶⁹



In addition to making a behavior less rewarding, owners must provide an alternative and should praise and reward their cat whenever she uses it. Icceman/Adobe Stock

Whenever the owners see their cat scratching the correct items, they should praise and reward her. These actions allow the cat to express the needed, instinctive behavior without harming the chair.⁷⁰ They also make using the providing scratchers preferable and thus more rewarding than scratching the chair.⁷¹

It is imperative that owners complete both actions. Making a behavior less self-rewarding will **always** be ineffective **without** providing alternatives.

In the above example, the alternatives are the several scratchers. Owners must provide their cat with scratchers, otherwise she will use other inappropriate items, such as a couch or drapes. Once a cat uses **only** the scratchers, the sticky tape can be removed.⁷²

⁶⁷ Shaw, J. K., & Martin, D. (2015). *Canine and Feline Behavior for Veterinary Technicians and Nurses*. Ames, IA: John Wiley & Sons

⁶⁸ Shaw, J. K., & Martin, D. (2015). *Canine and Feline Behavior for Veterinary Technicians and Nurses*. Ames, IA: John Wiley & Sons

⁶⁹ Landsberg, G. M., Hunthausen, W. L., Ackerman, L., & L. G. (2012). *Behavior Problems of the Dog and Cat* (3rd ed.). Oxford: W B Saunders Co.

⁷⁰ Shaw, J. K., & Martin, D. (2015). *Canine and Feline Behavior for Veterinary Technicians and Nurses*. Ames, IA: John Wiley & Sons

⁷¹ Krieger, M. J. (2011). *Naughty No More: Change Unwanted Behaviors Through Positive Reinforcement*. Irvine, CA: i5 Publishing.

⁷² Johnson-Bennett, P. (2017). Furniture Scratching Explained. Cat Behavior Associates. <http://www.catbehaviorassociates.com/furniture-scratching/>

Human-Rewarded Behaviors

If a behavior is inadvertently rewarded by owners, once they cease rewarding it, the behavior will eventually stop. You will need to forewarn the owners that an extinction burst will often occur before the behavior stops.

In simplest terms, it means it will get worse before it gets better. The cat will initially try harder to get the reward she previously did, before she realizes one is no longer forthcoming.⁷³ During this time, it is imperative that the owners do not “give in” to the cat, since this will reinforce the behavior with intermittent rewards, ultimately strengthening it and resulting in an even longer extinction burst.⁷⁴ (Refer to Stage 2 to review extinction bursts.)



Once owners have stopped rewarding a behavior—e.g., nighttime vocalizing—their cat will eventually learn not to do it. However, the cat might initially intensify her behavior, such as meowing directly at them on their bed, in an attempt to gain a reward.
Julia Shepeleva/Adobe Stock



In addition to no longer rewarding the unwanted behavior, the meowing cat's owners should play with her every day to help her expend excess energy.
steffstarr/Adobe Stock

In the example of the cat vocalizing at night, as hard as it might be, her owners must ignore her when she meows at night.⁷⁵ She will eventually learn that meowing at night does not result in any rewards. In addition, her behavior is most likely caused by a decrease in daytime activity. The cat had probably played with the son and/or his Chihuahua dog and because they are gone she now has excess energy.

This can be managed in a variety of ways. First and foremost, family members should play with the cat regularly to help her expend energy.⁷⁶ In addition, the owners should give her solo interactive toys for extra mental and physical stimulation.⁷⁷

⁷³ Shaw, J. K., & Martin, D. (2015). *Canine and Feline Behavior for Veterinary Technicians and Nurses*. Ames, IA: John Wiley & Sons

⁷⁴ Haynes, S. N., & Heiby, E. M. (Eds.). (2003). *Comprehensive Handbook of Psychological Assessment: Behavioral Assessment*, Vol. 3. New York, NY, United States: Wiley, John & Sons.

⁷⁵ Shaw, J. K., & Martin, D. (2015). *Canine and Feline Behavior for Veterinary Technicians and Nurses*. Ames, IA: John Wiley & Sons

⁷⁶ Fanning, R. (2015). *Dog and Cats: The Most Well Guarded Secrets Exposed*. United States: Lulu.com.

⁷⁷ Rodan, I., & Heath, S. (2015). *Feline Behavioral Health and Welfare*. United Kingdom: W B Saunders Co.

Ineffective Techniques

Whether owners want to stop their cat from jumping onto counters, scratching furniture or performing any other behavior, squirt bottles, shouting and/or swatting at a cat, and other forms of direct punishment will be ineffective.⁷⁸

For example, if owners use a squirt bottle to keep their cat off certain areas, she will learn to stay off the areas *only* when they are around. If they swat at her when she starts to scratch the couch, she will learn to she only has to avoid scratching when her owners are nearby.⁷⁹

She will also inevitably begin to associate her owners' presence with hostile actions,⁸⁰ which will damage the bond between her and her owners.⁸¹



Direct forms of punishments, such as a squirting a cat with water, will never prevent a behavior, such as digging in a plant, from occurring; instead, it simply teaches her to not do it when her owner is present.
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This is why double-sided tape, foil, and other disagreeable surfaces should be added to forbidden areas.⁸² Owners can praise and reward their cat for choosing to scratch or jump up onto the right locations whenever they see the cat making the correct choice.⁸³ In the cat's mind, the unpleasant location (whether it is a couch or a counter) is "punishing" her, while her owners are sources of praise, treats and happiness.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ Edney, A., & Caras, R. (2006). *ASPCA Complete Cat Care Manual*. New York, NY: DK Publishing (Dorling Kindersley).

⁷⁹ Case, L. P., & MacAllister, B. (2009). *Canine and Feline Behavior and Training: A Complete Guide to Understanding Our Two Best Friends*. Boston, MA, United States: Delmar Cengage Learning.

⁸⁰ Landsberg, G. M., Hunthausen, W. L., Ackerman, L., & L. G. (2012). *Behavior Problems of the Dog and Cat* (3rd ed.). Oxford: W B Saunders Co.

⁸¹ Case, L. P., & MacAllister, B. (2009). *Canine and Feline Behavior and Training: A Complete Guide to Understanding Our Two Best Friends*. Boston, MA, United States: Delmar Cengage Learning.

⁸² Hotchner, T. (2007). *The Cat Bible: Everything Your Cat Expects You to Know*. New York: Gotham Books.

⁸³ Krieger, M. J. (2011). *Naughty No More: Change Unwanted Behaviors Through Positive Reinforcement*. Irvine, CA: i5 Publishing.

⁸⁴ Liu, C.-L., Hussain, A., & Luo, B. (Eds.). (2016). *Advances in Brain Inspired Cognitive Systems: 8th International Conference, BICS 2016, Beijing, China, November 28–30, 2016, Proceedings*. 2016. Cham, Switzerland, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG.

Section Review

1. List and briefly describe the ABCs of cat behavior: _____

2. How would you identify the ABCs of a behavior? _____

3. How would you determine a cat's motivation for a particular behavior? _____

4. Why is it important to determine if a behavior can be prevented or managed? _____

5. Explain the differences between self-rewarding and human-rewarded behaviors: _____

6. Provide an example of how a cat owner could resolve a self-rewarding behavior: _____

7. Provide an example of how an cat owner could resolve a human-rewarded behavior: _____

8. What might be the initial result of resolving a human-rewarded behavior? _____

9. Describe some ineffective techniques for solving behavior problems: _____

10. Why should any type of direct punishment be avoided when modifying a cat's behavior? _____



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Problem Behaviors

Inappropriate Elimination

Inappropriate urination (or urination outside the litterbox) is the No. 1 reason why owners surrender their cats to animal shelters.⁸⁵ There are two distinct types of inappropriate elimination—litterbox avoidance and marking/spraying behavior—and each has a different behavioral source and requires different management techniques.⁸⁶

You will need to educate owners on the difference between regular urination and spraying. Urinating cats will squat down to eliminate. Spraying cats will back up to a target and stand with their rear high; then with their tail erect and quivering, they will squirt a stream of urine.⁸⁷

Owners should never punish their cats for inappropriate elimination, as the cause is always stress of some type, and punishment will only cause additional stress.⁸⁸



The No. 1 reason people abandon their cats at shelters is inappropriate elimination—their cats are not using the litterbox and/or are spraying indoors.

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⁸⁵ Rodan, I., & Heath, S. (2015). *Feline Behavioral Health and Welfare*. United Kingdom: W B Saunders Co.

⁸⁶ Shaw, J. K., & Martin, D. (2015). *Canine and Feline Behavior for Veterinary Technicians and Nurses*. Ames, IA: John Wiley & Sons

⁸⁷ Landsberg, G. M., Hunthausen, W. L., Ackerman, L., & L. G. (2012). *Behavior Problems of the Dog and Cat* (3rd ed.). Oxford: W B Saunders Co.

⁸⁸ Landsberg, G. M., Hunthausen, W. L., Ackerman, L., & L. G. (2012). *Behavior Problems of the Dog and Cat* (3rd ed.). Oxford: W B Saunders Co.