

# An ethical viewpoint: the role of veterinarians and behaviourists in ensuring good husbandry for cats

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**Summary** Cat owners commonly consider their pets to be members of their families, and many factors contribute to a high level of owner attachment to their cats. Suppression of a cat's emotional needs in favour of the emotional requirements of the owner may produce a less satisfactory relationship for the owner, and usually for the cat as well. Owners' failure to comprehend their cat's true demands of life, and their false expectation of their ability to fulfil human psychological demands lies at the heart of many feline behaviour problems.

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## Cat/owner relationships

A survey of pet owners as far back as 1985 found that 99% of both dog and cat owners considered their pets to be members of their respective families and 97% talked to their pet at least once a day (Voith, 1985). Factors which contribute to very high levels of owner attachment to cats are similar to those for dog owners, notably of being single or childless, or being in need of emotional support. Many studies over the years have also classified pet cats and dogs as 'substitute children'. Another survey of 53 cat owners revealed that 6 people described their relationship with their cat as being closest to 'mother', 27 said that they occasionally talked to their cat in the same way as they would talk to a child, and 18 talked to it exclusively in this way. To describe the relationship as substituting for a child simply on these grounds overlooks many other important factors and is a gross oversimplification (O'Farrell and Neville, 1994).

By describing a pet in these terms, owners are stating how it fulfils similar particular needs for

them. To be 'a child' to its owner means that a pet satisfies his or her need to look after a dependent. Being 'mother' describes how owners feels that their pet protects them, though this is more likely to be found in the human/dog relationship. From a less dependent viewpoint, dogs and cats are perhaps more commonly seen by their owners as 'close friends' and, like 90% of those surveyed, most of us would say that our cats and dogs are aware of our moods (O'Farrell and Neville, 1994).

There are no great surprises in these findings for those who work with companion animals and their owners on a daily basis, but psychologists studying human relationships, such as marriage, have found that difficulties are more common when partners fail to regard each other as separate individuals with their own personalities. This is because they are then more likely to project their own needs on to their partner. Usually, the greater a person's state of anxiety and conflict, the greater will be their need for such a projection.

Such attitudes may also cause owner dissatisfaction with a cat and underlie many behaviour problems in the cat that are brought to veterinarians for help or referred on to behaviourists. Suppression of a cat's emotional needs in favour of

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the emotional requirements of the owner tends to produce a less satisfactory relationship for the owner, and possibly for the cat as well. A Swiss study involving 158 housewives and their cats confirmed that the more the owners responded to their cat, the more likely it was to respond to them; and the more interactions initiated by the cat, the longer these interactions lasted (Karsh and Turner, 1988). Owners' failure to comprehend their cat's true demands of life and their false expectation of him to be able to fulfil human psychological demands lies at the heart of many feline behaviour problems.

Most owners in Europe allow their cats the freedom of the great outdoors to do whatever it is that cats do all day outside, and then care, feed and enjoy social interaction with them when they return home. Only about 10% of cats are believed to live permanently indoors in the UK, although the figure is increasing and already much higher in the USA. The keeping of cats is rising steadily, and cats are already far more popular than dogs in terms of numbers owned throughout the western world. This is largely because modern urban living and working lifestyles often militate against the keeping of the more demanding dog in favour of the more convenient and adaptable cat. Much of the recent growth in cat keeping has occurred where our lives are busiest, in the city, where many owners live in hi-rise apartments. Their cat may simply be unable to get to ground level, but other owners in the city have concerns about their pet's safety outdoors and choose to keep them indoors even when they live at ground level.

One in four cats will perish under the wheels of a car in the UK, although, as with other causes of mortality, death on the roads is highest in the first year of life. If a cat survives its first year and learns about dangers in his environment, he is very likely to live a long life of fifteen years, or even twenty and beyond, and even in a busy tarmac territory. A cat in the city is thought to be at even greater risk from being injured or killed on the road than one in suburbia or the countryside, simply because of the greater volume of traffic and numbers of roads, but many cats in the countryside also fall prey to cars. The surprise solitary vehicle per day passing down a lonely road can often catch out the relaxed and unwary cat, and so some owners in rural areas also choose to keep their pet indoors for safety reasons too. This may also save young cats from what may be risky competition with wild predators such as foxes and birds of prey, and also from any risk of being poisoned by baits left out for countryside vermin.

Indoor cats are also unlikely to catch diseases that cats communicate one to another, are protected against injuries and resulting infections that might arise from fighting, and are far less likely to contract parasites, such as fleas and worms. And of course, some timid and older cats may also prefer to stay indoors anyway, warm, protected and well away from all startling things that can happen to them outdoors.

As more and more people opt for keeping a valuable pedigree cat (11% in the UK), the perceived risks of theft also encourages many owners to confine their cat to the home for his own safety, even though the chances of domestic short hairs being stolen for their fur, or to be made into glue, make-up etc are probably vastly over-estimated. The fact is that many cats with outdoor access simply move home for one reason or another, or just get lost or accidentally shut away in yard sheds and garages, and then get taken in by someone else, or are passed on as strays to humane societies to be found new homes. Concerns to confine a cat in the home where he is loved and avoid the possibility of him wandering away also prompt many to keep their cats indoors even though there may be a relatively safe and interesting environment outdoors for him.

## Feline emotional well-being

Such is the depth of the modern owner's attachment, and his or her increasing view that their cat is very much part of their family and should therefore be made to stay at home. All of this has meant that many cats will now live their entire lives indoors, which may be good news for veterinarians and the various support industries that produce the basic requirements of food, cat boxes and litter, cat beds and toys etc, and there is no doubt that indoor cats live longer and safer lives and are likely to be physically healthier than cats allowed to go hunting and exploring outdoors. But what of their mental welfare? The cat began to evolve thirteen million years ago and ultimately became a top-of-the-food-chain, obligate carnivore, and a solitary hunter. This means that a cat is designed to move through its hunting environment, on the one hand avoiding danger and, on the other, detect its prey, then approach and catch it. To do this, cats have had to evolve astonishing sensory capabilities, with specialised eyesight that functions at low light levels when their usual prey of rodents is most active and birds are roosting, and a sense of hearing that extends way up into the range employed by bats so that they can hear the very high frequency

chattering of rats or mice. Their sense of smell, although largely reserved for social organisation rather than hunting, is also far superior to ours, and that of most dogs. Along with their very touch-sensitive whiskers and coat guard hairs, cats can be regarded as super-sensory compared with social hunter-gatherers like man, or hunter-scavengers like dogs, that find much of their food as part of a team and can rely on one another to detect and respond to danger.

More than just being able to detect so much more of what is going on around them, cats actually *NEED* to have their senses stimulated during their waking hours, and have the opportunity to organise the behaviours that go with detecting, stalking and catching their prey (Centre of Applied Pet Ethology, 2002). Being socially dependent on their mother when young, and, as adult pets, often sociable with each other, they may also need to have lots of social contact with other cats, and all will certainly need to have such contact frequently with their owners to remain content in a domestic setting. This is where the keeping of cats allowed the freedom of the outdoors is so easy. The cat simply goes outside when he feels the need to exercise, or to hunt, a need which is so emotionally fundamental to the cat that it usually persists very strongly even in the most well fed of pets. He goes out also to find stimulation for his highly advanced mammalian brain to keep it in fit responsive, working order. The opportunity to explore new things in a changing environment and fulfil the desire either to be sociable, or to be highly territorial and even defend resources against other cats in the neighbourhood, are all part of cat's needs. They are just as important for his psychological health as being loved, played with and fed the best food indoors by his loving owners.

Far from being easy and convenient to keep a cat permanently indoors, it is a highly challenging prospect for owners to do so properly from the cat's point of view. The challenge is exactly the same when it comes to keeping animals in cages or small enclosures in zoos—how best to keep them happy and stimulated in a small and rather unchanging environment when every aspect of their protection, feeding and physical health is managed for them? The key, as many zoos have discovered over the last twenty to thirty years, is to introduce the animals to the emotion of frustration in their day-to-day lives. This is just as vital to the contentment, mood homeostasis (i.e. maintaining a normal level of neurotransmitter balance, the concept of 'resting contentment') and well-being for the indoor cat, as all the love and attention on demand that a pet can

be offered. Yet it is frustration and challenge that is often missing from all confined environments, whether or not the resident is cosseted and handled individually. If there are no problems ever to have to resolve in terms of play, acquiring food, or access to novel items, then a cat can simply become bored or obsessed with some minor aspect of life as a compensatory mechanism, and as a bizarre means of driving reward neurochemistry systems in an unchanging place. It is the relief of mild frustration by overcoming little difficulties and exploring new things that brings a feeling of reward and well-being. Indoor cats can otherwise all too easily become lazy and unfit if they only ever have to walk a few paces to their bowl for food and become unmotivated to carry out normal motor patterns of behaviour. Instead they may sleep even more than the two thirds of life that cats, like many predators, normally sleep anyway, simply as another means of recycling neurotransmitters such as dopamine, associated with engendering feelings of well-being (Centre of Applied Pet Ethology, 2002). Hence simply leaving a cat alone to get on with his life indoors with all the food in the world among a range of unchanging toys that never move, in an environment that never changes, and with just an occasional, or even lots of cuddles, is to neglect their real needs and increase the likelihood of many behaviour problems developing. It is also to miss out on the true joy of owning and living with one of the planet's most astonishing creatures.

## Ethical considerations

Most owners who keep their cats permanently indoors are likely to provide an excellent standard of physical husbandry, nutrition (in terms of dietary quality, even though indoor cats are more likely to become overweight) and disease prevention and so make excellent clients for veterinarians. Yet the same clients are also far more likely to subjugate their cat's emotional needs to their own and provide an inadequate level of attention to their pet's psychological needs, simply because the cat is confined to a small unchanging area. Some veterinarians and behaviourists may take a moral viewpoint that the keeping of cats permanently indoors is highly likely to deprive them of the opportunity to perform innately rewarding species typical behaviours and thus constitutes cruelty in terms of emotional deprivation. Veterinarians have, however, taken a solemn oath to treat all animals entrusted to their care and therefore may be unable to influence the nature or standard of

psychological husbandry that their clients offer their cat when it is presented for treatment, even for a physical condition such as an injury caused by self-mutilation in a cat that may be directly attributable to living in an emotionally impoverished home environment. It may be very difficult in these circumstances to explain to such an owner, who otherwise loves and cares for the physical needs of their cat (and shown at least a willingness to bring it to a veterinarian for treatment), that it is their home circumstances which are causing the cat to suffer and that it may be better for the cat to be given to someone else who can provide a psychologically better environment. Such bravery, of course, exposes the veterinarian to the risk of losing such clients and associated loss of income, either because the client follows such advice and re-homes the cat, or because they reject the advice and the veterinarian who gave it, however suitably such advice may have fulfilled the veterinarian's duty of care.

Another option open to veterinarians in such circumstances may be to prescribe psychotropic medication for the cat to decrease the intensity of its emotional response to the conditions that it finds itself living in, and reduce the level of expression of behaviours, from lassitude to indoor spraying to self mutilation and stereotypies et cetera, that are perceived as problematic by the owner. But such an approach is simply to mask the behavioural response to impoverished living conditions and expunge the owner from their proper duty of care to their cat. This is especially so if the problem behaviours return when the medication is withdrawn and so imply that it must be given for the lifetime of the cat to maintain the owner's level of satisfaction with their pet. The temptation to justify such long term, single faceted treatment on the basis that such cats are automatically permanently clinically ill, rather than showing inconvenient or bizarre coping strategies which warrant a broader and more difficult approach, must be resisted. Indeed, many behaviourists in Europe argue that the prescription of such medication should not be viewed as an ethically acceptable form of treatment except to accompany appropriate husbandry changes, if and where possible, and behavioural therapeutic approaches. The problem for indoor cats, is that it may not be possible to achieve any significant level of improvement because the home environment is so emotionally unsuitable for the cat, with or without medication.

Behaviourists may be able to be more hard hitting with the diagnosis and advice they can offer to clients referred with behaviour problems in indoor

cats, and take more time with the owners to try and motivate them to devise a more fulfilling lifestyle and enrich the home environment. However, they can only hope to achieve any success with owners who are prepared to be referred in the first place. The front-line question for veterinarians therefore, is perhaps whether it is ethical for them to offer clients a minimal, cheaper, problem-masking treatment if they refuse to undergo a more demanding programme of treatment directed by the practice or a referred behaviourist. I suggest not, and that to do so is perhaps to compromise the veterinarian's sworn, legally enshrined duty of care.

Perhaps it is here that veterinarians, behaviourists and others involved with the care of companion animals should draw the ethical line with their clients, but only with appropriate professional support. The various representative veterinary and behavioural bodies should also be far more proactive in increasing public awareness about the emotional needs of cats so that, as the numbers kept continues to rise, they are not kept in inappropriate or emotionally damaging circumstances. Breeders, veterinarians and behaviourists alike need surely to confront society far more and expound the notion that, while keeping a cat indoors for the whole of its life may be physically easy, a long safe life is no representation of a happy life and may in itself cause suffering unless a huge efforts are made to stimulate such a highly evolved creature from the start to compensate for a lack of opportunity to express normal behaviours outdoors.

The following four-point advice plan may be useful for veterinarians, behaviourists, breeders, and humane societies to adapt to give to owners to help them keep an indoor cat psychologically healthy and so enjoy keeping him all the more:

### **Play the right games**

The first key for exercising mind and body to promote best mental and physical health in indoor cats of all ages is lots of action that allows your cat to express its innately rewarding predatory sequence of behaviour: 'eye-stalk-chase-pounce-bite' so as to make up for the lack of opportunity to practice on real prey in the process of acquiring food. Instigate hunting type chase games with a range of moving toys that you activate up 30 times per day for solitary indoor cats. This is because cats are designed to need to catch about 10 mice per day for survival but would perhaps, even with a very generous estimate, only catch a mouse one time in three approaches (initiations of the hunting sequence). So dangling a fishing rod type toy and



rolling balls of paper past your cat's line of vision and then up and over furniture to chase and pounce on needs to be offered frequently. It doesn't take long, it's great fun to see a cat co-ordinate all those marvellous senses and lithe muscular movements, and it really makes the difference between a cat that is happy indoors and one that is just plain neglected and bored.

### **Social contact**

This is the easy part! Always respond to your indoor cat if he comes to you in search of a cuddle or a cosy chat and make time in your busy schedule, especially when returning home after some hours away, to say hello for at least a few moments and re-establish that bond. Indoor cats tend to mirror the activity and waking patterns of their owners and rest and sleep when they are alone, so it is very important to 'be there' when they need you. But don't wake him or chase him around trying to be nice to him. As one Swiss study showed, you will probably have less contact with him if you do and he may see you as a disturbance and even a threat and avoid you. Let him dictate the relationship and always respond, but don't rely on affection as your only form of contact, however much you both enjoy it. Play hunting is probably more important to a normally solitary predator, but equal measures of both are required. Of course, indoor cats should never be kept singly if at all possible so that they have this vital social contact even when you are away. Some cats may be very territorial and anti-social and prefer to live alone, but if they can be kept in pairs or more, they will not only hopefully enjoy being affectionate with each other, but also practise their hunting behaviours in gentle form on each other. This means that the number of chase games that you should instigate with each individual cat could perhaps be reduced to a couple of sessions of about five chase and pounce games each.

### **Territory size versus novelty**

When it comes to territory, the amount of space available to a cat isn't the main factor. One study suggested that an indoor cat should have at least two rooms to move around in and not be able to see all parts of his patch from all points, but this is rather meaningless. Although many people build an outdoor run for their cats, many cats soon get bored with that area in the same way as they get bored with the house once they have got to know all about it and all the people and animals in it. Free ranging

cats, of course, encounter a changing environment every time they go out, and so to compensate for that lack of stimulation indoors, you must try to provide as changing an environment as possible in your home. Bring in lots of new objects with different smells attached for your cat to investigate every day. Make sure your cat's vaccinations are fully up to date, and then bring him tree branches, rocks, cardboard boxes and tubes, newspapers folded into run through arches, natural platforms, cat furniture etc, as well as a steady flow of new toys. Everything will be new and demand an inspection, and help ensure that he continues to use his senses to the full.

### **Introduce frustration: make feeding more difficult**

Abandon thoughts of providing food in bowls as this cuts down a cat's natural active foraging time to just a few minutes per day compared with the hours that he would need to spend hunting to feed himself. Instead, provide complete dry food in foraging toys that he must manipulate for the food to fall out—these are available in all good pet stores. Divide the daily recommended ration into as many refills as possible and hide the toys in different places every time, including in and around the new objects that you bring him for exploration. Divide the rest of his daily ration into lots of portions that you hide elsewhere around the home for him to seek out and discover before he eats.

There are many good reasons why you might choose to keep your cat indoors from the start, but with good daily attention to his diet, healthcare and his physical and psychological well being, he will enjoy a long and healthy life. The opportunity to investigate novelty, forage, practice hunting behaviours and enjoy direct social contact and affection with you, and hopefully other cats too, is vital to keeping him happy and compensated for the lack of natural change, challenge and self organisation that goes with free access to the outdoors. As ever, the more effort you make to understand and react with cats, the more rewarding they are, indoors or out!

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