
HANDLING AND GENTLING

Seeing a young kitten playing or an adult cat snoozing in the sun, it is sometimes difficult to remember that this pet is an animal. As such, its behavior is potentially dangerous. In fact, about 10% of the SF /SPCA Animal Behavior Hotline are about cats that bite people. The reason for this surprisingly high percentage is that few owners ever bother with basic handling and gentling exercises that would be an integral facet of the routine husbandry of almost any other animal. The reasons for gentling horses and cattle on the farm or lions and tigers in the circus are obvious. However, people tend to be blind to the necessity of handling and gentling pets.

A cat needs to be gentled for two reasons. First, the cat must learn not to harm humans. Most cats are not very big, but they have five weapons, and they are extremely fast when they use them. An angry or scared cat will grab hold with the front claws, scratch with the back claws, and then dig in with the teeth. They seldom cause serious bodily harm or life threatening injuries. However, the victim of a cat attack is usually left scarred and scared. Secondly, a cat that is not gentled is likely to react badly when it is handled by strangers; for example, a routine injection can be an absolute nightmare. For a cat that is seriously ill and has to be admitted to a clinic, the psychological trauma of the strange surroundings and regular handling can cause the cat's condition to worsen. Why subject the poor animal to this needless suffering? Instead, why not teach the cat that not only is human handling non-threatening, but also, it is actually quite pleasurable.

Gentling Exercises

The ultimate goal is that if a stranger approached a sleeping cat, he/she could tug its tail, gently hold a paw, pick it up and give it a gentle squeeze, restrain it by the scruff, lie it down, roll it over, and pat its stomach and the cat would sleep through the entire thing. Of course, for goodness sake, do not harass the cat in this fashion each time it falls asleep. The purpose is to ensure that the cat would never react badly when handled by a stranger. Moreover, the cat should actually look forward to being handled in this fashion.

At first adult owners should try these exercises. Once the cat is comfortable being handled by adults, the owners should teach the children in the family how to handle the cat. Then the owner should ask a number of friends to perform the same exercises. Just because the cat allows the owner to handle and restrain it does not mean that it will accept handling from strangers.

Bites and Scratches

The cat must be taught that it should never bite or scratch humans and that it should not struggle when restrained. When cats become overly excited during play with humans, they usually start to scratch. Whenever the cat gets its claws out, toning down the play session or playing possum for a few seconds often causes the cat to retract its claws. If it does so, praise the cat and resume playing. If not, gently tap the cat on top of its paw and say "No claws kitty!". At this stage, it is unlikely that the cat will understand what you are saying, but it will soon learn. The play session will not resume until the kitten puts its claws away. And if it does not, just walk away and ignore the cat.

Whenever the cat bites too hard, let the cat know that it is hurting you by shouting: "OUCH! That hurt!" Walk away and end the play session immediately. Cats, especially kittens, love to play, and they love to play with their owners. Curtailing a play session is an extremely potent punishment. The cat soon learns that it is its own rough behavior that causes the abrupt cessation of an otherwise enjoyable play session.

Handling

If the cat is touchy about being handled, you help to start the exercises when the cat is tired. Most cats are pretty relaxed in the early afternoon. Initially, start off by handling the cat in ways that it normally finds pleasurable; scratching behind its ear and stroking the top of its head and along the back. Lengthen the strokes to include more of the cat's body. Stroke down the hind legs and the tail. Stroke along the side of its body. See if the cat will roll onto its side, or completely rollover to accept a 'tummy rub'. Use one finger to stroke along the top of the front legs. Use plenty of praise and reassurance and an occasional food treat. Work slowly and try to gradually increase the area of the cat's body that may be stroked.

Within a very short handling session, you will be able to locate the cat's sensitive spots that will require additional careful attention. Usually, these are the mouth, paws, ears and tail. When working with sensitive areas, touch the cat for a second and reward it with a treat. Then touch the cat for two seconds. Gradually, increase the time of contact required for a food reward. Soon the cat will happily tolerate prolonged contact in these areas.

Gently take hold of the cat's paw and scratch it behind the ear or feed it a number of treats in a row. Then let go and ignore the cat for a while. Repeat this routine a number of times. The cat will soon look forward to having its paw held. Carefully try to spread the toes. Continually praise and stroke the cat with the other hand as long as it appears relaxed. Examine each toe and nail.

Facing the cat's head, scratch it behind the ear with the fingers and use the thumb to gently fold back the inside of ear pinna to examine inside. Similarly, when examining the mouth, continue scratching behind the ear and with the thumb gently flip the up the upper lip to expose the teeth.

Restraint

It is important to teach the cat to happily accept restraint because there are times when it will be necessary to restrain the cat, and there is no way that one person can successfully restrain a cat if the cat does not wish to be restrained. If restraint is necessary but the cat is unwilling, either the handler will get hurt, or the cat will be scared, stressed and maybe injured.

There is very little difference between hugging and restraint. Some cats will readily accept exceedingly physical hugs from a child, but will not permit themselves to be restrained by a veterinarian. Cats are less inclined to accept restraint from strangers, especially if the stranger reaches for the cat in a cold, business like fashion.

The owner should prepare the cat for regular and unexpected trips to the veterinarian. When greeted by the cat, before mealtime and play sessions, first ask the cat, "Want a hug?" And then pick it up, supporting and cradling its body with the left arm and wrapping the right arm in front of the cat's neck to hold it by the scruff. Have other family members and friends do the same. The cat quickly learns that it is fun to be restrained (hugged). When a stranger needs to restrain the cat, he/she should ask it in a friendly voice if it wants a hug, then the cat knows what is going on and will be less likely to react adversely.