

Understanding Feline Social Behavior:

The Key to Preventing Problems in Multicat Households

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Changing Feline Demographics

As the cat increases in popularity as a companion animal, the number of households owning cats is increasing and the number of homes with more than one cat is also on the rise. If we consider natural feline behavior, we can understand why these changes are potentially stressful for the domestic cat and approach the setting up and maintenance of multi-cat households in a way that minimizes the potential for problems.

Feline Social Behavior

Cats were once thought to be asocial creatures and the poem by Rudyard Kipling promoted the image of "the cat who walks by himself". Cats were only thought to come together for breeding and outside of the mating season they were considered to be solitary creatures. When groups of cats were identified, they were thought of in terms of loose aggregations, like animals round a waterhole. However, scientific study of feline interactions revealed that cats are indeed social creatures and they can form significant relationships with their fellow felines. The natural composition of feline social groupings is of female cats who are related to one another and mothers, grandmothers, aunties, sisters and daughters live together in communal areas where they can provide defense for the kittens within the group, both through their physical presence and through communal nursing and the provision of shared antibodies. Males are often relegated to the periphery of the social grouping with one adult tom usually breeding the majority of females in his territory and other males being generally rejected from the area in a decisive manner.

Effects of Social Structure on Feline Hostility

Although cats are social creatures, this is a relatively recent development of their behavior in evolutionary terms. In feral situations group size is determined by resource availability and competition over resources within social groups is therefore unnecessary. However, hostility to outsiders protects resource availability and can therefore be considered as a highly adaptive behavior. Contact with total strangers is kept to a minimum and much of feline communication is aimed at keeping distance between individuals. The behaviors which are designed to keep strangers at bay include olfactory, vocal and visual communication, but when strangers come into close proximity the aggression between them can be intense. Within social groups overt physical aggression is mild and rare and aggressive signals are designed to avoid out and out physical conflict wherever possible. Feline survival is a solitary affair and self-preservation is a high priority. There is no need for cooperation within feline society in order to

improve access to vital resources and hierarchical structure is therefore unnecessary. One of the consequences of this is that the concept of turn taking is alien to feline culture and behaviors which are designed to induce submission have no place in cat to cat or cat to human interactions. Last minute diffusion of conflict, which is so characteristic of canine interactions, is therefore impossible within feline society and cat to cat aggression invariably results in injury once the threshold of physical confrontation is crossed. A lack of reliance on social interaction for survival reduces the feline instinct to repair relationships after conflict and when aggression occurs in a feline context the victim is usually expected to leave.

Feline Independence

The lack of reliance on social contact is reflected in the cat's ability to survive alone and whether out of necessity or choice, all cats are capable of existing in a social vacuum. This does not mean that all cats will choose to avoid feline, or human, company but they can take it or leave it and most will adapt readily to a solitary existence. However, some individual variation is certainly seen and research has explained this by identifying different requirements for social contact within feline society. Low requirement cats are generally found to live on the periphery of social groupings whereas high requirement cats are more likely to live within the social group. Those cats with higher social requirements may arguably be better suited to a domestic environment, but even when social interaction does take place in the feline world it is important for people to acknowledge that it takes a different format to interaction in the context of obligate social creatures like people and dogs. Feline interaction is characterized by low intensity and high frequency interactions and cats are content to pass their owners or feline housemates on a regular basis and simply send a brief vocal signal in their direction. In contrast, human social interaction is characterized by high intensity but low frequency interactions and therefore owner expectation of social communication between owners and cats and also between cats in the same household can be unrealistic. One possible result of this misunderstanding between the species is that owners project their own need for social company onto their cat and multi cat households are formed. In situations where the cats concerned are related to one another, it is possible that social interaction will continue in a beneficial manner, but when social compatibility is not considered the resulting situation can be extremely stressful for the cats concerned.

Maintaining Feline Society

The most important consideration in multi-cat households is the issue of social compatibility and while cats may co-exist under the same roof that does not necessarily mean that they belong to the same social grouping. The most ethologically sound groupings are siblings but even then, when cats are forced to share territory they have some fundamental behavioral requirements which include:

Free and immediate access to important resources when required

The provision of privacy

The ability to escape from or avoid potential stress

In many domestic situations these basic feline requirements are simply not met and cats in multi-cat households are subject to chronic low grade stress as a result. Overt aggression is certainly a possible manifestation of this situation but more subtle effects may be evident and problems relating to freedom of movement around the house and to indoor deposition of urine are not uncommon.

The Consequence of Restricted Access To Resources

Cats do not share important resources between social groups and yet in multi-cat households cats are regularly expected to share resting places, feeding stations and watering holes even though their social behavior indicates that they consider themselves to be causal housemates rather than members of the same family!

The implications of this can be far reaching and one scenario which tends to foster a mistaken belief that all is well within multi-cat households is a willingness by the cats to come together at feeding times. This proximity at feeding time is often taken as a sign that all is fine within the cat colony but it is important to remember that food is a vital resource and behaviors are often suppressed in order to allow access to the nutrition. The cats will therefore suspend hostility for long enough to eat their meal but in many cases the resource of the water bowl is not considered to be so valuable and the resulting restriction of access to water can have profound implications in terms of health, since a decreased level of water intake is an important risk factor for conditions such as interstitial cystitis. Indeed where recurrent lower urinary tract disease occurs within a household it is always worth enquiring about the social relationships between the cats that live there.

An expectation for cats from differing social groupings to share latrine facilities may lead to the onset of house soiling problems while a lack of access to three dimensional space can lead to a significant decrease in physical exercise and an increased risk of obesity.

Lack of privacy over latrine facilities can sometimes be solved by the use of covered trays but every case has to be judged on its own merits since the use of hooded litter trays can lead to issues of ambushing and make cats more reluctant to use the facilities provided. It is therefore important to experiment with facilities until owners find something that provides for the needs of all of the cats within the household. This may mean increasing the number of trays available and also increasing the number of locations in which they are found so that the cats within the home can get to the toilet without running the gauntlet of a member of another social group.

One of the important feline coping strategies in terms of social stress is to hide and in many modern multi-cat households this is often not possible due to the human preference for floor to ceiling furniture and open plan rooms! Lack of access to retreats can result in cats feeling exposed and vulnerable and when coupled with insufficient supply of other vital resources, such as food and water, the result can be chronic stress which leads to self-directed behaviors such as over grooming.

Conclusions

Cats are social creatures but their social behavior differs greatly from that of people and dogs. They will naturally live in small groups of related individuals and avoid contact with other felines. It is therefore understandable that cats can find it stressful to live in a domestic environment and to share their core territory with cats that they are not related to. However, by paying attention to natural feline behaviors and modifying the environments accordingly we are able to offer ethological solutions and to manage multi-cat households in a way that effectively minimizes the stress for our feline companions.

Two of the most useful rules in the setting up of multi cat households are the selection of potential housemates, after considering natural feline behavior, and the restriction of the number of cats in any one household to socially compatible levels from a feline perspective. Paying careful attention to the introduction process is always important and the provision of sufficient levels of vital resources to allow individual access for all cats whenever they feel they need them will increase the possibility of cats co-existing successfully within a multi-cat household.

References

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