

FELINE BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS: THE INFLUENCE OF DECLAWING

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Abstract. *A survey of a computer group interested in pets was conducted to determine the incidence of behavior problems in cats and whether it varied with the sex of the cat, with declawing, or with the number of cats in the household. In addition, information on the brand of cat food and litter was obtained, along with details of litter hygiene. Sixty owners of a mean of two cats responded. The percentages of cats exhibiting behavior problems were: jumping on counters or tables, 60%; scratching furniture, 42%; eating house plants, 36%; acting aggressively toward other cats, 25%; stealing food, 25%; house soiling, 16%; inappropriate vocalizing, 16%; acting aggressively toward people, 12%; chewing fabric, 7%; hissing at people, 5%. A significantly greater percentage of declawed cats, as compared to intact cats, was reported to jump on counters or tables. There was significantly more meowing and also more jumping on counters among cats in single-cat homes than among those in multiple-cat homes. There was no difference between the sexes in the proportion exhibiting the various behaviors. This information can be used to advise owners as to the type of misbehaviors cats may display. It also indicates that declawed cats are not prone to have more problems than do clawed cats.*

INTRODUCTION

The increasing popularity of cats as pets has focused interest on their role in the human-companion-animal relationship. In order to improve that relationship, it is important to know what factors may increase the likelihood of cats

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exhibiting misbehaviors or behaviors that are not consistent with their owners' life-styles.

One area of controversy is the effect of declawing on a cat's behavior. The Cat Fanciers Association of America (1987) will not allow a declawed cat to be shown, and the Humane Practices Committee of the Canadian Veterinary Association (1988) has indicated that behavior problems may increase following onychectomy (declawing) and recommended against the practice.

The purpose of this study was to determine if declawed cats have a greater incidence of behavior problems than do nondeclawed cats. A survey was conducted to answer the main question and also to investigate other influences on feline behavior.

METHODS

The survey was conducted by posting a list of ten questions on the bulletin board of a computer interest group, *rec.pet*, on UseNet, a national computer network. The respondents must have read the questions and been motivated to respond; we have no further information on them. The questions dealt with the cats' signalment (age, breed, sex, name, and surgical status—i.e., clawed or declawed, intact or neutered). One question consisted of a list of behavior problems: biting or scratching people; fighting with other cats; eating plants; scratching furniture; chewing fabric; house soiling (urinating or defecating outside litter box); jumping on counters; meowing too much or at the wrong time (in the middle of the night or very early in the morning); stealing food; hissing at people; and other.

The z-test was used to evaluate the effects on each of the behavior problems of declawing, gender, and status as a single cat versus being one of several cats in a household. The Student's t-test was used to evaluate the proportion of cats exhibiting each of the behavior problems in single-versus multiple-cat households.

RESULTS

Sixty owners responded and gave information on 122 cats. The mean number of cats per household was 2.0 ± 0.1 (SEM). The mean age of the

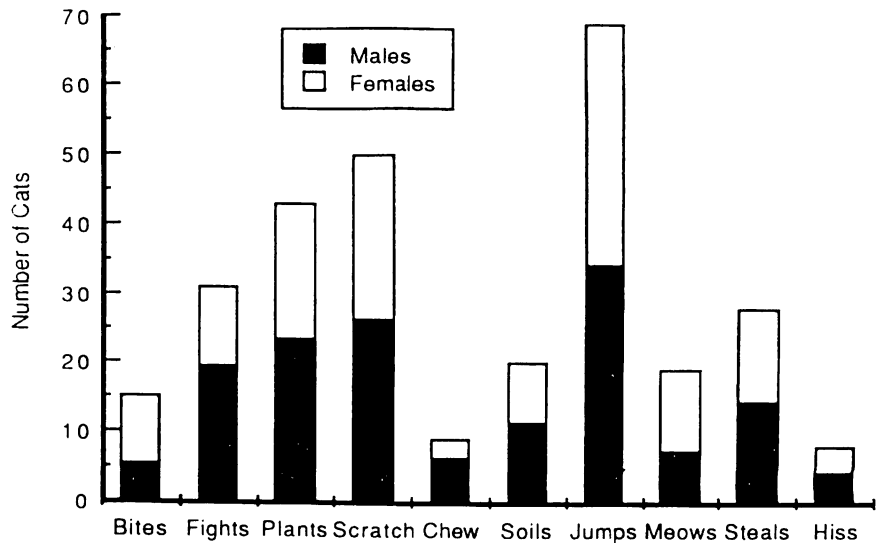


Figure 1. The number of cats of each sex displaying various behavior problems. "Bites" refers to biting the owner, "fights" refers to fighting with other cats, "plants" refers to eating plants, "scratch" refers to scratching furniture, "chew" to fabric eating, "soils" to eliminating outside the box, "jumps" to jumping on table or counter, "meows" to meowing during the night or too early in the morning, and "steals" to stealing food.

cats was 3.7 ± 0.3 years. The majority (64%) of the cats were domestic shorthair. Only 11% were purebred, most of those Siamese. Twenty-four cats were declawed, and 102 were intact. Fifty-eight were male (48 castrated), and 64 were female (56 spayed).

Figure 1 illustrates the number of cats of each sex displaying each behavior problem. The percentages of all cats exhibiting behavior problems were: jumping on counters or tables, 60%; scratching furniture, 42%; eating house plants, 36%; acting aggressively toward other cats, 25%; stealing food, 25%; house soiling, 16%; inappropriate vocalizing, 16%; acting aggressively toward people, 12%; chewing fabric, 7%; hissing at people, 5%. Respondents also noted whether their cats were shy ($N = 5$), territorially aggressive ($N = 2$), skittish or neurotic ($N = 2$), overly affectionate ($N = 2$), or played roughly at night ($N = 3$).

The only behavior problem that declawed cats exhibited significantly more often than intact cats was jumping on counters or tables ($p < .001$). Intact cats scratched the furniture significantly more often ($p < .001$). Single cats jumped on counters more often ($p < .03$) and meowed more ($p < .02$) than did cats in multiple-cat house-

holds. Twenty percent of respondents with a single cat reported a behavior problem, whereas 25% of respondents with more than one cat reported at least one cat with a behavior problem, but there were no significant differences in individual behavior problems between single- and multiple-cat households. Further, there were no differences in the proportion of problems exhibited by male cats in comparison to female cats, nor in the proportion of cats exhibiting each of the behavior problems from single- or mixed-sex households.

Although respondents' opinions on declawing were not requested, 12 indicated disapproval by either capitalizing the word *no* or following it with an exclamation point.

DISCUSSION

The most common behavior problem among the cats studied was jumping onto counters or tables. This behavior occurred more frequently in declawed than in clawed (intact) cats and more frequently in cats in single-cat households than in those in multiple-cat households. Declawed and intact cats exhibited no differences in serious be-

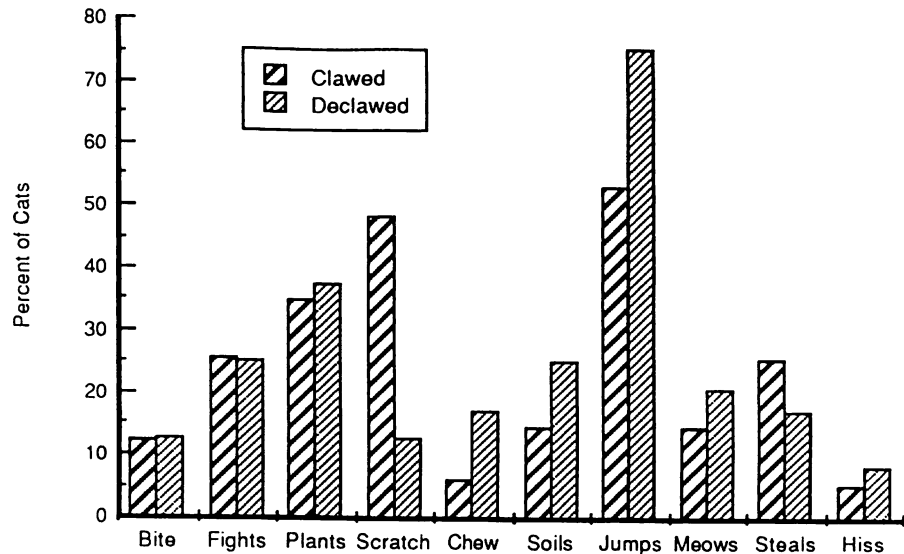


Figure 2. The influence of declawing on the percentage of cats exhibiting various behavior problems. (See the caption for Figure 1 for definition of behaviors.) Note that only jumping on counters is significantly greater in declawed cats. A small percentage of owners felt that scratching motions by declawed cats were still a problem.

havior problems such as biting people or house soiling. Cat owners most often consult veterinarians about treatment of the second problem (Olm and Houpt 1988).

Twenty percent of the respondents reacted negatively to the question regarding declawing, an indication of the prevalent feelings about the procedure. Yet the fact that declawed cats jump onto things suggests that they are agile and, presumably, not uncomfortable, although they undoubtedly experience some discomfort immediately following the operation. Still, there is no indication of long-term behavioral consequences. Consequently, while behavioral means should be used to encourage cats to scratch on the proper objects and to refrain from scratching furniture and draperies (Beaver 1980; Hart and Hart 1985), if a cat's behavior cannot be changed, onychectomy is preferable to losing the cat from the household. This is particularly true because cats, especially adult domestic shorthaired cats, may be difficult to place in other homes and will have to be euthanized.

On the negative side, a declawed cat will not be able to defend itself effectively, especially from dogs, nor will it be able to climb trees as

quickly as an intact cat can. Therefore, declawed cats should be kept indoors.

Hart and Cooper (1984) have found that male cats are more likely to spray, but the male cats in this study were no more likely to house soil than were female cats. Only six of the males house soiled, and the proportion of those that sprayed is unknown. Failure to distinguish between types of house soiling may be the reason for the difference in the results reported here from those of Cooper and Hart.

Jumping onto counters or tables appears to be the most common cat behavior problem, as noted in this survey and a similar telephone survey of owners of clawed and declawed cats (Bennett, Houpt, and Erb 1988). Veterinarians, humane society personnel, and others dealing with pet problems should be prepared to offer advice on this common, if trivial, problem. The best solution is to make the surface unappealing to the cat. Double-sided sticky tape is usually effective, because the cat cannot see it and will avoid previously treated surfaces even after the tape has been removed. Another approach suitable for teaching an animal to avoid any particular area is to use a burglar alarm, a beam, and a

receiver that triggers the alarm when the beam is broken. Other less expensive ways of frightening a cat when it jumps onto a counter can be devised. Owners should be discouraged from hitting or yelling at the cat, because that usually teaches it only to avoid jumping on the counter when the owner is present and, in addition, may make the cat frightened of its owner.

Aggression between cats is a more serious problem. Separation and gradual reintroduction with or without drugs such as progestins are the usual procedure. Owners must understand that cats normally are territorial animals (Liberg 1980; Wolski 1982) and may never tolerate an intruder, particularly an adult.

Aggression toward people is usually mild and related to play. Mild punishment, such as flicking the nose or holding by the scruff, is appropriate for cats that bite while being petted. Cats that chase ankles may be punished by spraying them with water or compressed air, but a suitable substitute form of play, such as chasing a toy, should be available. Persistent, serious unprovoked aggression often requires the cat to be removed from the household if no physical cause can be determined.

House soiling is a more complex problem; it can involve defecating, urinating, or spraying outside the litter box. Stress in the environment, such as a new person, cat, or rug, may trigger it. Feline urological syndrome is a very frequent initial cause of urinating outside the litter box, and a cat may continue to avoid the litter even after it is clinically normal (Olm and Houpt 1988). Scrupulous hygiene and a variety of litters and pans usually reduce the frequency of the soiling episodes. If not, antianxiety drugs may be prescribed. These are particularly effective for cats that spray.

Meowing inappropriately is difficult to treat. The owner must be sure that the cat is not vocalizing because it is uncomfortable or genuinely hungry. Meowing is also noted when another cat in the household dies. A form of mourning behavior, meowing in this case is probably a separation call. If there is no apparent cause other than a desire to attract the owner's attention, punishment may be used. Spraying the cat with water sometimes only teaches the cat to meow around a corner so that it cannot be reached.

Playing with the cat before bed so that it will sleep longer and feeding it late in the evening may help to keep the animal quiet in the early morning.

In conclusion, a survey of cat owners indicated that declawing increased the incidence of only one problem behavior, that of jumping on counters. This was the most common misbehavior reported by owners of both clawed and declawed cats. The other problems were meowing, house soiling, scratching—which was not a problem among declawed cats—and aggression toward other cats or people. This survey and an earlier telephone survey (Bennett, Houpt, and Erb 1988) indicated that declawing did not lead to serious behavior sequelae.

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