



WHY CATS FAIL TO USE THE LITTER BOX

by Eric Smith, Founder
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We're not veterinarians, nor are we certified animal behaviorists. That said, though, we've certainly fought our way through most of the common cat behavior issues over the last quarter century. We've cared for and found homes for many hundreds of animals over the years. We've also read extensively about litter box habits and have attended numerous conferences on cat behavior, so as they say, we have QBE ("qualified by experience") degrees in cat litter box habits. Over the years, we've had our share of litter box debacles, too, and have managed to work through them in one way or another, so we hope our brief discussion here will offer you some hope about dealing with the issues you're going through.

Causes Of Poor Litter Box Behavior

When a cat chooses not to go potty in the place we want him or her to—the litter box—the first thing we think is that there must be a medical cause. Unfortunately—or fortunately, depending on how you look at it—it has been documented that in over 90% of cats, this is not the case.

Certainly some cats do get cystitis or Feline Urological Syndrome (FUS, which is the formation of crystals or sludge, generally in the bladder, which causes irritation, bleeding and sometimes blockage of the urethra or ureter, making it difficult or impossible for a cat to urinate), so a medical cause should always be ruled out. If a cat is going to the litter box frequently or, once there, is spending a long time squatting in the box—and perhaps is crying while in the box—a trip to the vet is definitely needed. Frequent & large-volume urination can be a sign of diabetes; squatting for a long time, straining & crying can signal FUS. Either of these maladies can be quite serious and should be checked out promptly by your veterinarian.

But what if the cat isn't exhibiting either of these characteristics? This is where common sense and psychology come into play.

The Litter Box Itself

Cats are quite finicky (duh), so any small change in their litter box environment can be enough to deter them from using the box. Have you changed the box's location? Have you switched brands of litter? Have you begun using perfumed powders in the box, or have you begun using plastic liners? Have you thrown out the old litter box and replaced it with a new one? If you did implement a new box, is it covered or uncovered...and is this different from the old one? Have you been too busy lately to keep the box as clean as your cat would like?

Cats' sense of smell is estimated by scientists to be 1000 times stronger than that of humans. As such, they're much more attune to changes in appearance and scent than we are, which can sometimes be the cause of a change of litter box habits. Cats have sometimes been known to exhibit poor litter box compliance because of a new smell in their home, on their owner or on a new visitor.

As is evidenced by our cats' behavior when inclement weather is approaching or an earthquake is imminent, they're also much more sensitive to vibration than we are. Think about it. Have you ever seen a cat "freak out" when the furnace comes on for the first time in the fall? Cats spend most of their time on the floor, where they're much more likely to feel the rumble of the furnace than we are "all the way up here." What does this have to do with litter box habits? Plenty, as far as some cats are concerned.

Many folks place their litter boxes in the basement, often near the furnace or washing machine. Over the years, we've heard of cats who wouldn't use the litter box if it was too near the furnace or washer due to all the vibration and racket these machines can cause. We've also seen cats who would use the box in that location for awhile, then one day simply decide they were tired of the lousy bathroom ambiance and fail to use the box any more. So, pay attention to where your litter box is...*from your cat's perspective*. How would it seem to you if *you* were the kitty?

Cats can also be skittish (duh #2) and are prone to feeling trapped, so experts recommend that the litter box be positioned in such a way as to offer more than one approach and/or escape route. This is especially important if your household contains more than one cat, as none of us wants to be sneaked up on while we're going potty. (I know I personally hate it when that happens!) Putting the box in a far away corner that leaves your cat no options is a no-no, especially if one of your cats tends to bully the other(s). The litter box needs to feel safe to your cat.

The surface that the box rests on also seems to be key to some cats. Experts have found that some cats prefer the box to be on a hard surface, while some appear to prefer it on a soft surface. As we all know, some cats have been known to go potty far away from the litter box on the hardwood floor in the dining room, while others have been known to go potty in the corner of the carpeted living room. Most of the times when cats do this, they're trying to tell us that there's something wrong with their litter box setup.

Outside Influences

A greatly underrated cause of a change of litter box habits is jealousy of an outside animal. As you can well imagine, if your friend were to come by and bring her cat with her, you wouldn't expect your cat to be too thrilled. Cats like to have what they perceive as their own territory, so if a strange cat comes into that territory, the strange cat—no matter its breed, size, coloring or temperament—is going to be perceived as a nemesis and poor litter box habits might result. But this isn't the type of outside influence I'm mainly speaking of. I mean literally outside.

Most of us have cats who love to hang around by the window watching the world go by. This is by and large fine...until another cat, a dog, a groundhog, a squirrel, a large bird or another small animal comes into view. Then, our cats feel threatened and act as if their territories have been invaded. Even though we as humans can differentiate between *inside* the house and *outside* the house, to our cats the "intruder" is just feet away and is perceived as a substantial threat. Experience has shown us that cats seem unable to understand the concept of glass as a *barrier*.

If a strange cat comes by once and then never again, your housecat will likely not begin exhibiting poor litter box behavior. However, if the cat prowls by every night, sooner or later your cat is probably going to get fed up and may show this displeasure in an undesirable way. Experts we've heard speak have recounted quite a few stories of cats whose poor litter box behavior was traced to outside animals intruding into the cats' perceived territories. When the owners built tall fences, called Animal Control to come pick up the stray cats or convinced their neighbors to keep their cats (or dogs) in their houses where they belong, the bad behavior subsided. Some owners have noticed their problems disappear when they added on to their homes, thus occluding certain views from their cats. A home with high windows a cat couldn't see out of might be perceived by us humans as boring for the cat, but I can pretty much guarantee that the cat wouldn't ever exhibit poor litter box behavior due to outside influences.

Types Of Cat Litter

The odd "ground up corn cobs mixed with pea gravel and marinated with flax oil" types of alternative litters aside, most of us have two litter choices: conventional and clumping. There are some newfangled types of litter on the market now which may seem cool to the pet owner, but which may not be well accepted by the cat.

Conventional litter is less expensive to buy, but it quickly gets urine soaked and must be thrown away every few days, lest your home begin to smell like an outhouse.

Clumping litter (from a Latin phrase meaning "better for us lazy tightwads") is the type that forms into a ball when the cat urinates. This type is inherently cleaner because we just scoop out the feces and urine balls, throw them in the trash (NEVER flush clumping litter) and the box is, in theory at least, as clean as it ever was. Not only that, because we're not tossing all the litter every few days, we're saving money and helping the environment. Clumping litter may be perceived as being more expensive than conventional litter, but once you figure that you're not throwing the baby out with the bathwater, so to speak, you'll realize that it's actually a lot less expensive.

In addition, clumping litter offers a benefit that is important to talk about in a discussion of litter box habits: it is significantly softer under a cat's paws and feels more like the earth he's used to "in the wild" (even if he's been an inside cat all his life, he's got eons of "in the wild" in his genes). Studies have shown that, given a choice, most cats—especially declawed cats—prefer clumping litter to conventional litter—both for its texture and for its inherently increased degree of cleanliness. If you've had some outside-the-litter-box activity lately, perhaps you should give clumping litter a try.

Even the best clumping litter can get gnarly after months of use, so even if you only have one cat in your household, dump all the litter if your nose or your cat tells you to and disinfect the litter box. Your cat will thank you for it. We dump our

DooDoo Voodoo Clumping Cat Litter (available through our website) twice a year—but we have lots of cats in our rescue facility, most with special needs.

Other Factors That Can Influence Your Cat

Some cats have been shown to be quite persnickety about their owners' habits. Changes in occupation (do you smell different?), changes in schedule (did you switch from working days to working nights?) and changes in behavior (did you used to come home every night and brush your kitty, but now your friends come over to play poker?) can all trigger a change in litter box habits. Did you used to let your cat sleep with you, but now you throw him out of the bedroom and close the door? All these can affect your cat's litter box habits, not to mention his personality as a whole. And let's not forget...anyone who's read a women's magazine has heard how a girl's cat "doesn't like" her new friend/boyfriend and has turned into a demon. So, again, think like your cat and you'll realize how your actions may be perceived as hostile.

Call Me Mr. Obvious

It probably goes without saying...but here goes anyway. If you have brought home a new pet and introduced it to your cat in the wrong way, you're more than likely going to be cleaning up your share of messes around the house. If introduced to each other properly, cats can become friends MUCH more quickly than you would ever assume they would. If you're thinking of getting another cat to add to your household, please take the time to consider this change carefully and also read our article *How To Introduce A New Kitty To Your Household*, which is available on our website at www.doodoovoodoo.com. Collected from nearly two decades of trial and error, reading, speaking with vets & discussing the issues involved with behaviorists, this short article has helped a lot of people introduce new cats to their homes without all the trauma normally associated with putting strange cats together. Please check it out when you have a chance, and feel free to share it with others you think might benefit from it.

In our house (not our rescue facility), our Alpha Cat (the cat all the others acknowledge as being dominant and in charge) is a gray female DSH (domestic shorthair) named Gracie. Gray DSH females have a reputation for being dominant, and Gracie, although generally sweet, does her best to live up to her reputation. For a while it was just Gracie, Heidi (our rescued Terrier/Chihuahua mix who was rescued from the middle of a busy intersection during Friday evening rush hour traffic the day after Thanksgiving) and Simon (a frail, very feral white male we would see streak past once a week or so) and everything was fine as far as Gracie was concerned. But then we rescued some other cats who ended up living with us, two of whom were perceived by Gracie as being dominant types. Even though we KNOW the right way to introduce new cats and really tried to shower Gracie with praise and affection, she took offense and urinated outside the litter box, then one of the new cats did so, too, and the peeing contest had officially begun. What to do.....

We began paying even more attention to Gracie than we had been. We closed off the rooms of the house where she'd done her business—except the living room, which was impossible to restrict access to. This was back before we perfected DooDoo Voodoo's formula, so we pulled the carpet back, cleaned the areas with strong mixtures of readily-available household cleaners, sealed the subflooring with multiple coats of BIN by Zinsser (a KILZ-type product we've found to be more effective), replaced the carpet pad & tack strips, then had the carpet professionally steam cleaned on both sides. In these areas, we applied our odor neutralizer, the formula for which didn't work nearly as well as DooDoo Voodoo now does, then reapplied it, then reapplied it. After a while, the urine odor was gone and all that remained was a faint aroma of the odor neutralizer. Our technique worked so well, as it has for many people we've advised over the years, that for the last few years we've given the cats access to the previously-soiled areas and they no longer urinate there. (You can see pictures of the soiled areas in our brochure and on our website.) Visitors to our home have no idea that there has ever been urination on our carpet. They don't see it, and they don't smell it. Luckily, now that DooDoo Voodoo's formula has been perfected, all the work we went through isn't necessary for most folks.

Years have passed and, largely due to the way we make it a point to interact with Gracie and the other cats (all of whom are still living in the house with us, by the way), the cats have not re-soiled the areas, and they all now get along great. Gracie and the two other females in the house are now quite good friends and often curl up together; Gracie has convinced the males that she is, indeed, the Alpha Cat and they've agreed to her terms and conditions. Whereas many people would've relinquished or euthanized Gracie and possibly some of the other cats, we stuck it out, showered Gracie with kindness, cleaned up the messes to the best of our abilities and, lo and behold, everything turned out as well as it possibly could have. Never give up.

Backed Up Against The Wall

We once had a cat named Edison who was the first ever of our rescued cats to urinate outside the litter box. Once, while Edison was still alive (he passed away a few years ago after having lived through a dramatic reconstructive renal surgery and many years of highly managed kidney failure), Julie gave me a birthday card that showed a bunch of cats at a party, standing like people on their hind legs and waiting in line to use the restroom. One of the cats was obviously stepping out

of line and heading the other direction, so Julie drew an arrow to him labeling him "Edison," added a balloon above his head and in it wrote, "I'll just use the wall."

Unfortunately, there are some cats—and not all of them are male—who will just seem to consistently go potty outside the litter box. When this occurs, it's our opinion that one of a few things is happening. (1) Either the cat lives in a multi-cat household and will forever WANT to be the Alpha Cat even though he or she ISN'T the Alpha Cat, or (2) one of the other stimuli talked about in this article is having an effect, or (3) there was another animal—most likely a cat—in the house before and the current cat can still smell the previous cat's scent (sometimes this could be urine-related, but it doesn't have to be). In our highly cleanable rescue facility, we have two males who to this day continue to urinate outside the litter box in what is, quite literally, a peeing contest. One has been with us for over 16 years and has kidney failure, heart disease and diabetes, so we've just gotten used to cleaning up after him. The other is younger and you'd never guess he'd so badly want to be the Alpha Cat, but he does. If we were to place him up for adoption and find him a good, single-cat home where he could be the king, we'd bet you dollars to doughnuts that he'd give up his undesirable behavior. (Note: after writing this article, we did find him a home, and he never again exhibited his behavior. Unfortunately, the adopter lost her job and made the decision to move cross-country, so she brought JimBob back to us, where he now, again, pees outside the litter box. She absolutely swears he did NOT do this at her house. We pushed and pushed her to see if she was telling the truth, and she swears he did not pee.)

The Recap

Medical problems can certainly cause a cat to exhibit a change in its litter box habits, so never poo poo (pun intended) your cat's changed behavior; something serious could be occurring. But, if you get the cat checked over and the vet pronounces him or her fit as a fiddle, look to other changes in the cat's environment as possible causes. Chances are that once you really get to looking around and thinking about it, you'll come up with more than a few things that might be causing your kitty to exhibit poor litter box behavior. One at a time, try to alter the stimuli and I'll bet you'll finally figure out what's been making your cat so disagreeable.

If you've tried everything you can think of and you're still having no luck, we urge you to set up an appointment with a certified animal behaviorist. Their fresh perspective and training can sometimes lead them to a solution you've never dreamed of.

Please, though, if you truly love your companion animal, DON'T give up and relinquish your animal to a shelter, a stranger or the pound. To do so is more than likely sentencing your cat to, at best, a ton more unfriendly stimuli and, at worst, euthanasia. Stick it out. Work to give your companion the environment and the life he or she deserves — and even expects — from you. You'll get paid back in more ways than you can imagine.

We at Four On The Floor appreciate your willingness to do the right thing. You're to be commended for not taking the easy way out at the expense of your pet.



Eric and Julie Smith are the founders of two federally-licensed animal charities and for some time operated a nonprofit, low-cost, feline-only spay/neuter clinic in Indianapolis. They have lectured on feral cat management and early-age spay/neuter at a statewide veterinary conference held at the Purdue School of Veterinary Medicine and were the founders of the Indy Pets ALIVE coalition. Because of their work on behalf of animals, they have been featured many times in newspapers and magazines, and on television and radio. They founded Four On The Floor Pet Products, Inc., in 1988. Up to the limit allowed by law, proceeds from the sale of Four On The Floor's products are funneled back into work on behalf of needy animals.