

THE 10 COMMANDMENTS OF CAT MANAGEMENT

The Art of Managing Multicat Households

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**Feline
Friendly
Article**

When managing multicat households, I like to organize the art of feline care into what I call the 10 Commandments of Cat Management. Therefore...

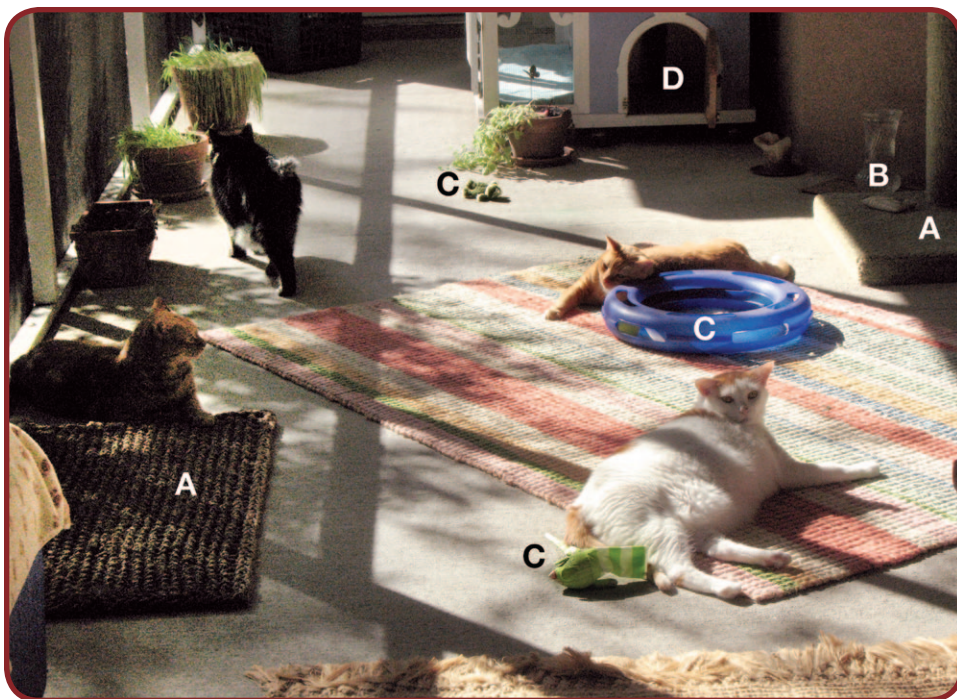


Figure 1. A feline friendly environment; note the rug and post available for scratching (A), tall receptacle for water (B), toys (C), and cat “house” (D)

Thou Shalt...

1. PROVIDE PLENTY OF SPACE

Cats are very much like people: Some cats become stressed when they are in close proximity to each other, while others like to be close to their preferred associates.¹

Whether a client lives in a large house or a studio apartment, there are several ways to provide more room for cats living together in a household.

- For example, once horizontal space (square footage) has been maximized (Figure 1), vertical space can be added by installing perches and placing cat “condos” or “trees” in the home (Figure 2).
- An online search on the term *cat furniture* provides information and photos that give owners ideas on how to make their households more cat friendly. Consider incorporating some of these ideas into your practice as examples.
- Expansion to the outdoors—using special cat fencing or enclosures—can be an option as well (see 10. Consider Outside Spaces).



Figure 2. Cats enjoying the vertical space created by a cat condo

Thou Shalt...

2. NOT EXPECT CATS TO GET ALONG

Cats are social, but their societies are insular. If a cat is raised individually and then brought into a group of cats, management of social interaction is more difficult.

Typically, introductions go more smoothly if cats are:

- Brought into groups as juveniles
- Introduced in pairs (similar ages; preferably related or already familiar with each other), which allows the pair to interact together, reducing the chance the newcomers will aggravate the other cats.

The occasional hiss, growl, and tussle—which are common behaviors and part of the normal feline social repertoire—are expected and normal. However, if one cat begins stalking another or a cat starts hiding and is reluctant to emerge for food, attention, or litter box use, behavior problems may ensue.

3. PROVIDE FOOD

Free-roaming cats reportedly eat up to 13 small meals a day,² most of which involve hunting. It makes sense, therefore, to incorporate this natural behavior into the lives of household cats, which can be done by:

- Having the owner distribute food bowls throughout the house—at various levels that make the cat jump or climb to reach them
- Providing a variety of food puzzle toys that challenge the cat both mentally and physically to extract the kibble.

While “free feeding” can be a concern in overweight or obese cats, research has shown that meal-fed cats tend to be more aggressive and less cooperative than those fed free choice.² As always, the goal is to strike a balance, such as free feeding smaller amounts of food and using automatic feeders that provide food throughout the day. The latter keeps the cat “grazing” versus consuming all available food at once.



Figure 3. A pot of planted cat grass

Cats Going Green

Cat grass and catnip provide natural options for feline treats and entertainment.

- Encourage owners to keep fresh cat grass (typically a mix of oat, wheat, and rye) in large, sturdy pots around the house (Figure 3). It takes about a week for grass to germinate and it is edible for 2 to 3 weeks.
- Fresh catnip is usually available at nurseries; dried catnip can be found in toys or loose. It can be sprinkled onto throw rugs for cats to roll in.

4. PROVIDE WATER

By adulthood, the average cat requires approximately 200 mL of water per day, which is usually acquired from 3 sources: drinking water, water in food, and water from nutrient metabolism of fat and energy.²

In some cases, cats:

- Tend to drink more if the water dish is separated from the food source
- Particularly prefer water from a tall receptacle, such as a sturdy flower vase.

Research has shown that cats:³

- Prefer a flowing water source to one that is still; therefore, providing a fountain—whether designed for cats or humans—in the home is recommended (Figure 4).
- Like to use faucets to access flowing water as well.



Figure 4. Cat drinking from a small fountain

5. PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PLAY

Everyone agrees that kittens play—often very roughly, and play is also an important part of the daily lives of adult cats. This play includes interacting with each other and/or “their” humans. The opportunities cats had as kittens to engage in “appropriate” play may determine how they behave as adults.

A study demonstrated that hand-reared kittens were no more likely than queen-raised kittens to develop behavior problems or display human- and conspecific-directed aggression and fear.⁴ However, the hand-reared kittens did have another cat in the household and at least 1 wand-type toy for interactive play.

In a multicat household, the owner needs to provide a number and variety of interactive cat toys (Figure 5) that the:

- Owner can use to play with the cats
- Cats can use to play with each other
- Cats can use to play on their own.



Figure 5. A “toy box” filled with a variety of cat toys



Appropriate play refers to providing interactive (and safe) cat toys that kittens and adults can play with on their own, with each other, and with their owners. Without appropriate toys, kittens redirect their play toward other cats and/or owners' hands/feet—behaviors that should be avoided before they become learned.

6. PROVIDE CLEAN LITTER BOXES

In an outdoor environment, cats have plenty of room to eliminate, often digging down a good distance to do so. These considerations should be taken into account when teaching owners about ideal litter box setup.

- **Size:** Boxes should be large—ideally the size of plastic boxes used for under-the-bed storage—and placed in areas that are easily accessible (**Figure 6**).
- **Number:** The typical rule is 1 box per cat plus 1 additional box. However, owners can consider using fewer boxes if large boxes are chosen and their cats coexist peacefully.
- **Litter:** Boxes should be filled several inches deep with litter. Research shows that cats prefer fine particulate litter material—the standard scoopable variety—but each cat may have its own preference.⁵
- **Cleaning:** Boxes should be scooped out at least once a day and completely emptied and cleaned with mild soap and water every month.



Figure 6. Litter boxes created from large, under-the-bed storage boxes

7. PROVIDE AREAS FOR REST

In an older study by Panaman,⁶ cats rested 22% (5.3 hours) of the day and slept 40% (9.6 hours), which conservatively translates to almost 15 hours of rest/sleep per day.

Therefore, cats need places in the house where they can “rest in peace,” especially if there are cats of different ages in the environment (**Figure 7**).

- The goal is to provide as many resting places as possible in various parts of the home.
- Resting places include perches, individual beds, and designated furniture. Again, owners can search online for ideas.



Figure 7. A quiet, secluded resting place

8. PROVIDE SCRATCHING OPPORTUNITIES

Cats scratch to communicate with other cats—if a tree or dirt isn't available, then a chair or rug will do. Indoor cats need a variety of scratching options—both vertical and horizontal (**Figure 8**).

Share the following guidelines with your cat owners:

- Scratching surfaces should be located in central, visible areas of the house because they serve as a form of feline communication.
- If possible, include a surface that a cat would be naturally attracted to outdoors (ie, a log).
- Increase the appeal of scratching surfaces by sprinkling or spraying them with catnip or Feliway (ceva.com), respectively.
- To prevent cats from scratching furniture, double-sided tape, such as Sticky Paws (pioneerpet.com) can be used as a deterrent.
- If furniture scratching cannot be tolerated, nail covers, such as Soft Paws (softpaws.com), can be applied to the cat's nails. To help set everyone up for success, make sure your patients' nails are trimmed regularly.



Figure 8. A well-used scratching post

9. REALIZE THAT SOME CATS URINE MARK

While urine marking is a normal (though undesirable) communication behavior for some cats, no one is exactly sure why cats communicate through this medium. A study in feral cats found that urine marking was more likely to occur on well-traveled pathways rather than territorial perimeters, which suggests that marking provides individual and temporal information versus serving as a deterrent to intruders.⁷

Spaying and neutering decreases the incidence of marking by 89%⁸; however, spraying is likely to increase in direct proportion to the number of cats living in the house. One study found that spraying increased from 25% in single-cat households to 100% in households with more than 10 cats.⁹

Provide Multiple Resource Locations

In multicat households, it is not uncommon for 1 or more cats to prevent access to important resources, such as food, water, and litter boxes. Make sure owners provide several locations for these resources in order to prevent feline confrontation and stress.



For more detailed information on urine marking, read Dr. Ilana Reisner's article, **Diagnosis and Management of Feline Urine Marking** (March/April 2012 issue of *Today's Veterinary Practice*), available at todaysveterinarypractice.com.

- **Prevention:** Owners can help prevent urine marking by remembering Commandment 1: the home environment needs to provide plenty of space for all cats.
- **Management:** If a cat begins to mark, there are a number of therapeutic options available, including anti-anxiety medications (eg, fluoxetine, clomipramine, buspirone), pheromones (Feliway) and, as a last resort, progestins.

10. CONSIDER OUTSIDE SPACES

Because space is essential in a multicat household, it can be expanded to a safe area outside. A safe area is one that is fenced specially for cats, keeping them within the enclosure and other animals or threats out.

- Fencing options include Purr...fect Fence (purrfectfence.com) and Cat Fence-In (catfencein.com).
- These fencing systems are relatively easy to assemble, and can be conformed to existing fencing or built around an area of the owner's choosing.
- Outdoor fencing is an especially good option if you are merging groups of cats, providing plenty of space for all cats.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

Client Education

Make sure to effectively communicate these commandments to owners with multiple cats as well as ensure they are implemented consistently in the households. Communication and follow-up are critical keys to success.

Veterinary Intervention

However, even when owners implement the recommendations discussed in this article, there will be situations when intercat discord develops or continues. Intervention by a behavior specialist (visit dacvb.org for a list of boarded veterinary behaviorists) should be pursued if:

- There is significant injury to 1 or more cats in the household
- One or more cats is hiding for long periods of time and

Evaluate Entries/Exits to Rooms

Have owners evaluate their homes' layouts if they have more than 1 cat. If possible, there should be more than 1 entry/exit point to each area of the house in order to prevent a cat from trapping/cornering another cat or preventing access to resources.



Have you seen HOW TO ENHANCE YOUR PET'S ENVIRONMENT?

This practical 1-page client handout:

- Highlights signs of stress in pets
- Provides suggestions for environmental enrichment
- Lists helpful links for additional ideas.

It is available for download and use in your clinic at todaysveterinarypractice.com. Select **Resources**; then go to **Client Aids & Handouts**.

- reluctant to emerge for food, attention, or litter box use
- One or more cats is particularly focused on another cat or cats (ie, bullying behavior)
- If a behavior issue continues to manifest despite the owner implementing the solutions provided by his or her veterinary team
- Any combination of the above. ■

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