

THE ALPHA CAT SYNDROME

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THE BITING CAT

Cats are supposed to be warm and friendly creatures, seeking owner approval, petting and cuddles and purring their way through peaceful evenings at home. But not all cats are this amiable or this compliant. Some have an agenda of their own and seemingly refuse to take no for an answer.

These are "alpha cats." They are natural leaders; they refuse to be led and attempt to take charge of practically every situation. These cats like their food when they want it and the way that they like it ... or else. They may only let you touch them for short periods of time and then again, only on their terms. They rebel when admonished and demand attention, access, and assets - when the mood so takes them. You don't own an alpha cat - he owns you, or at least, he thinks he does.

When alphas don't get their own way, they bully and pressure you into immediate action. They may bite your nose or toes to get you out of bed in the morning. They may shriek their demands for food until you are forced to give in. They may growl if approached while eating and some are protective of their toys and naptime. And watch out if you try to pick up your alpha cat or pet him when he's not in the mood. He may bite or claw his negative message to you in no uncertain terms.

Perhaps the most classical component of the alpha cat syndrome is petting-induced aggression. Alphas will jump up on your lap and allow themselves to be petted - but only for a short while. And when they've had enough, they narrow their eyes, glance sideways at the petting hand, and their tail begins to switch from side to side. This is the writing on the wall that heralds an imminent meltdown: Suddenly he'll swat, bite, and maybe roll onto his side so he can attack you with all five sharp points simultaneously.

What to do? In essence, they must be shown who calls the shots, who is really charge, and who is the supplier of all good things. Then and only then will their bossiness be honed into acceptance and respect. The name of the behavior modification program is "Nothing in Life is Free." It is a non-confrontational "tough love" leadership program in which the cat is required to earn all valued assets from the owner. A prerequisite is a modicum of training so that the cat can be called upon to carry out some task before being issued certain resources.

NOTHING IN LIFE IS FREE

- Avoid all confrontations. Make a list of situations and things you do that cause your cat to become aggressive and conscientiously avoid these situations. If your cat bites you to make you get out of bed, shut him out of the bedroom at night. You may need to have earplugs handy to mute the noise of caterwauling or door scratching at first but the cat's insistent phase should pass within a few days. If your cat bites you when he is on your lap and you are petting him, do not allow him onto your lap for a while until he has learned some manners. Also, learn to read the warning signs and ration your petting.
- Training. Despite popular opinion, it is quite possible to train a cat to respond on cue. The best way to accomplish this is with click and treat training. The whole process is explained in detail elsewhere on this website. Clicker training

basically involves three steps.

Step One Teaching the cat that the click of a plastic "frog" or clicker heralds the arrival of delicious food treat.

Step Two The cat learns that he can make the clicker click by performing certain actions.

Step Three The cat is rewarded with a click and a food treat only if he performs an action after being cued.

Take the action of sitting, for example. First click and treat the cat for nothing. This is called "charging" the clicker. Next click and reward sitting when it occurs naturally. Once the cat has grasped the concept and starts approaching you and sitting for a click (and thus a treat), escalate to the third step of the process, adding a conditional stimulus, in this case the word SIT. Using this technique I trained my cat to sit on cue in three days and she has never forgotten it. Try to teach your cat one new "command" per month. If this course is followed, in time you will find that pretty much all behavior problems, including biting, simply melt away.

- No free lunch. Feed your cat twice daily so that you control when he gets fed. At mealtime a cat should be hungry. Have him SIT before you click and put down the food bowl. The meal becomes the reward. No SIT = no food that mealtime. If the cat knows how to SIT on cue this request is perfectly fair. If he ends up missing a meal or two this will sharpen his appetite and thus the likelihood that he will respond as directed the next time. You will have made the meal conditional upon the cat showing you respect and good manners. Think of it as requiring the cat to say "please."
- Working for petting. Petting should be rationed to keep your cat hungry for your attention. Petting and attention are supplied only when the cat does something to deserve them, like responding to a voice cue or hand signal. This is particularly advisable if petting-induced aggression is a feature of your cat's aggressive repertoire. Even if your cat has performed well enough to deserve petting, be cognizant of a deteriorating situation. Furtive sideways glances and a twitching tail mean that it is time to quit. To avoid this situation, keep petting sessions short and never try to pet your way out of an aggressive moment.
- Put your cat's toys away and supply them only when he has done something to deserve them. Allow the cat free access to the toy until he loses interest and then pick it up and replace it in the toy chest (or drawer).
- Ration games. As useful as games are to help your cat blow off steam, they are also fun and as such should only be engaged in only when your cat earns the right.
- Never respond to attention seeking (demanding) behavior. Act dumb. Walk away. Disappear. Deliver what the cat wants later, on your terms, and only in response to the successful accomplishment of an assigned task like sitting, coming when called, or waiting patiently.
- Fire engine service. If your cat starts trying to bite you or acts aggressively in any way, remove yourself from his presence for a few hours (turn, walk away, and leave the cat alone) or herd the cat into another room for time out. If withdrawal of your company is the result of your cat's shenanigans, as opposed to you turning into a big squeaky toy, he should soon get the picture that you mean business and will not allow yourself to be victimized. Cats learn. You should, too.