

## LITTER BOX BLUES

Pat Miller

It's 5:30 a.m. Your alarm clock has just jolted you from a deep sleep. You stumble into the bathroom for your morning shower and your nostrils are assailed by the rank odor of fresh cat feces. Damn! What a rude awakening!! Fluffy has used the bathtub for her litter box again. You know darn well she has a perfectly clean litter box downstairs in the laundry room. What's wrong with that blasted cat, anyway? Good thing you got up first this morning... your husband has threatened to take Fluffy to the animal shelter if she keeps refusing to use her litter box.

Litter box problems are one of the primary reasons cats become homeless and end up getting euthanized at animal shelters. The real tragedy is that contrary to popular opinion, most litter box problems are solvable. Cats are naturally clean animals who instinctively bury their waste. When that instinct breaks down there is usually a good reason. It often takes just a bit of investigation to discover the reason and make the changes necessary to get Fluffy to revert to reliable litter box use again. (Note: Some male cats and an occasional female will spray to mark territory. This is *not* a litter box problem, it is a territorial marking problem, and needs to be addressed very differently than a true litter box problem.)

### Doctor, Doctor, Give Me The News

Any time there is a major behavioral change in your pet it is important to first explore possible physical causes before attempting behavior modification. Urinary tract infections and diarrhea can cause the most feline to miss the mark. Before embarking on a litter box retraining program, have your veterinarian give Fluffy a complete physical.

Once Fluffy has been given a clean bill of health we can start looking at the litter box itself. The most common causes for litter box misbehaviors are cleanliness, choice of litter material, and location. Elements of location include access, safety and comfort. Happiness is a Clean Litter Box

Dirty litter is by far the most common cause of cat litter box problems. Let's face it, some cats are just fussier than others. Maybe your last cat was a stoic who would hold his nose and tiptoe through a cat box minefield to use the last clean bit of litter before it would ever occur to him to use the carpet next to the dirty box. But Fluffy, your new cat, has higher standards. In her eyes, one deposit in a box makes it ineligible for further use until it has been cleaned and disinfected. What you see as a "perfectly clean" litter box in the laundry room may be offensive to her. Hence she heads for the bathtub, where her deposits are always tended to immediately.

It's time to change your routine. If you are somewhat blasé about cleaning the box, and only scoop every two or three days, just upping your efforts to daily cleaning may suffice. If that doesn't work, Fluffy may need to have two or three litter boxes so there is always a clean one available to her. With ample access to clean boxes, Fluffy might leave your bathtub in pristine peace.

### Freedom of Choice

What if Fluffy's three litter boxes are spotless yet she is still choosing the tub over the laundry room? Perhaps she doesn't like the litter you've selected. A glance down the aisle at your nearest pet supply store will identify at least a dozen different brands of litter. You can find scented, unscented, clumping, non-clumping, clay, pellets -- a

bewildering array of choices. Why not let Fluffy pick out her favorite? Buy a small bag of each brand, and maybe a bag of potting soil and another of sand. Fill several litter boxes, each with a different brand. (Fill, by the way, means 1-2 inches of litter, not filled to the brim of the box!) Check the boxes frequently, and see which one(s) Fluffy uses first and most often. Repeat the experiment over several days if necessary, until you see a clear preference emerge for one or two brands. Then simply switch to the brand she likes best. Scented brands of litter are often our cats' least favorite choice; the perfumes are added to litter to appeal to human sensibilities, and are often so strong as to be offensive to more sensitive feline noses. By the way, any unused or partially used bags of litter from Fluffy's rejects in your experiment can be donated to your local animal shelter.

#### Location, Location, Location

Does Fluffy sleep on your bed at night? If the litter box is all the way downstairs in the laundry room, maybe it's just too darned far to travel when she has to go to the bathroom in the wee hours of the night. The bathtub is *so* much more convenient. Would *you* want to run all the way downstairs to pee?

There might be other reasons Fluffy has decided that the laundry room is an undesirable location. Perhaps a pile of laundry tumbled over on her while she was using the box and she feels that it's booby-trapped and no longer safe to use. If she has to run the gauntlet past three family dogs to get there (including the new, 12-week-old obnoxious lab puppy) it might just be too much hassle. Maybe the laundry room door gets closed by accident on occasion, and she has gotten shut out. Sometimes in multi-cat households an aggressive cat looks for opportunities to ambush Fluffy in her box in mid-stream, when she is vulnerable and defenseless. Fluffy stops using the box for fear of attack, and looks for a safer bathroom spot.

Hooded litter boxes can also create litter box problems. The hood, which is designed to prevent objectionable odors from reaching *human* nostrils, holds the odor in the box itself. Fluffy, with her vastly superior olfactory senses, may turn up her nose at using a litter box that smells like an outhouse! Some cats don't like their fur to touch the sides of the hooded box. In addition, if there are safety issues with an aggressive cat in the house, a hooded box is a perfect trap with no escape route when the Terminator blocks the entrance.

There are lots of ways to make Fluffy's box safer and more accessible. If distance is a problem, give Fluffy several boxes in strategic locations throughout the house so she never has to travel far to find one. A baby gate across the laundry room door or the spare bathroom can prevent your canine pack (or that pesky toddler) from interrupting Fluffy when she is in an indelicate position. Make sure there are no booby traps to frighten Fluffy in her box -- no dryer buzzers to startle her in mid-use, or piles of laundry, toys, cans of food, etc., that could tumble on her and convince her that the box is unsafe. If the box is in a high traffic area, move it to a nice quiet corner. Be aware of any inter-cat dynamics that might disturb Fluffy's litter box habits, and if necessary, provide times when the cats are physically separated to she can poop and pee in peace. Look at the entire litter box picture from your cat's perspective, even getting down on your hands and knees and looking for things in the environment at her level that might be off-putting. Remove anything that you think she might find even remotely disturbing.

#### Remedial Litter Box School

Never, ever, punish Fluffy for litter box mistakes. Any punishment you use in regards to elimination problems will make her less likely to use the box rather than more. If you “catch her in the act” and pick her up and toss her in her litter box, she will make a negative association to her box rather than a positive one. Rewards work much better than punishment for most animals, including cats. If Fluffy’s mistakes are minor and infrequent, your corrective measures -- more frequent cleaning, extra boxes, different litter, new locations -- may be all it takes to reaffirm consistent litter box use. But if Fluffy has become a dedicated carpet (or bathtub) cat, it may take some committed rehabilitation to get her back in her box.

Try putting Fluffy and her litter box(es) in a small, quiet room with no carpeting, for a day. Have her food and water in a corner farthest away from the boxes. If she uses the litter religiously in the small room, maintain this routine for a few days, then gradually give her access to ever increasing areas of the house. Be sure to provide easy access to litter boxes as you expand her territory. If she won’t even use her litter box in a small room, you may need limit her space even more by putting her in a dog crate for a while. You will want a crate that is large enough for her, her bed, the litter box and her food and water, but not too much larger. It will be very important to clean the litter box several times a day so it is inviting to her. Once she is using the box in the crate routinely, you can gradually start giving her more freedom.

Sometimes, even in a confined space, Fluffy needs a little encouragement. You can use a technique called “clicker training” to reward good bathroom habits. Begin by teaching her that every time she hears the “Click!” of the clicker she gets a treat. There are lots of tasty kitty treats on the market. Find one that she likes a lot, or use human food that turns her on. Click the clicker and toss her a treat. Do it again. And again. Repeat the clicker/treat sequence over and over until you notice that when she hears the “Click!” she looks for the treat. It is important to give her a treat every single time you Click! the clicker, so she trusts the message. Once she knows that “Click!” = Treat, and you can begin to use the clicker to train her. All animals repeat behaviors that they find rewarding. Now that Fluffy understands that the Click! means a reward is coming, she will be likely to repeat behaviors that get clicked. You can use this to teach her to do tricks as well as to encourage her to use her litter box.

Set up a comfortable chair in the same room as Fluffy’s crate. Find a good book and settle down in the chair, with your clicker in hand and your kitty treats nearby. This could be a long wait, so be prepared. You are waiting for Fluffy to use her litter box. If you have some sense of her bathroom routine you can schedule your sessions accordingly. If you think she may be inhibited about toileting in front of you, sit where she can’t see you -- on the other side of the room, or just outside the door.

Sooner or later you should hear her scratching in the litter. Don’t click yet! Wait until she has finished and you hear her scratching to cover it up. Now Click!, and walk calmly up to her crate and toss in a treat. Calm is important. If you get excited and rush up to the crate you will frighten her. We definitely don’t want to frighten her. Timing is also important. If you Click! too soon, you will stop her before she is done. But you want to be sure to Click! while she is still in the box. If you Click! too late, you will be rewarding her for being *out* of the box, which is not what we want. If you can manage to Click! her for using her box several times over a three or four day period, you will reward her good behavior and reinforce her natural instinct to use the litter.

After a few days you can let her out of the crate and repeat the Click! exercise while she is free in a small room. If all goes well you can gradually give her more freedom and diminish the use of the Click! and reward. Be sure to continue to make litter box use easy for her, by giving her safe and easy access to boxes filled with clean litter that she likes.

Sometimes, no matter what you do, Fluffy insists on urinating and defecating in inappropriate places. If you have tried all of the suggestions described above and your cat still uses the bathtub, you have some hard decisions to make. You can decide that the bathtub isn't such a bad litter box after all -- it *is* easy to clean up, and you don't have to worry about getting stains and odor out of the carpet. You can create a safe environment outdoors and move Fluffy to the yard in an enclosed cattery or by adding a Cat Fence (which keeps your cat in a fenced yard) to your existing fence, allowing her back indoors for supervised visits when you can prevent her from sneaking off to illicit bathroom spots. If you have inter-cat aggression, you can try to re-home one of the cats. Or, if you can't tolerate her behavior and don't want to risk the hazards of outdoors, you can take her to a shelter. If you do, be sure to be honest about her problem. She will probably be euthanized, but it is not fair to her or to a prospective adopter to hide the problem. She will more than likely do the same thing in her new home, put her new owner through the same heartbreak you are feeling, and either end up back at the shelter, or worse, abandoned on the streets.

The good news is that the vast majority of cats can be rehabilitated if you are willing to try. If you care enough about Fluffy to make the effort, chances are extremely good that you will succeed in moving her out of the bathtub and back into the litter box. In the end, nothing will make you feel better than knowing you have saved the life of your well-loved feline friend.