



Playing detective...

A day in the life of a cat behaviour counsellor

'Miaow Tse Tung', I presume? Vicky Halls investigates the feline despot

Cats are territorial creatures, meaning they actively defend their patch against invasion to protect the resources within it that they need to survive. Selective breeding for domestication over thousands of years has reduced this innate behaviour sufficiently to enable the modern pet cat to live cheek by jowl with unfamiliar cats. Those with access outdoors patrol their territory, leaving scent marks that enable large numbers to inhabit the same area without frequent confrontation and the risk of teeth-and-claws disputes. Most of the cat's communication, using scent, body language and vocalisation is about avoiding fights and increasing distance between individuals rather than encouraging contact.

Unfortunately, competition within a territory is not only about neighbour versus neighbour; multiple cats within a household can share space without having that important mutual bond. They often form cliques or splinter groups and cohabit without tears by agreeing to disagree and avoiding each other whenever possible. This doesn't mean that there won't be times when things have to be 'said' between members of separate factions to reaffirm who gets access to a particular resource at any specific time. This is when a cat may well employ passive bullying as a highly effective tactic of psychological – rather than physical – warfare.

Bullying in the household

Within any multi-cat group there will be potential bullies; all they need is a victim. A 'victim' is any cat who responds dramatically and with obvious apprehension to the posturing and threatening behaviour of another. The more the cat responds to this form of intimidation, the more the bully will 'up the game'. Some of the more determined types do not stop short of driving their victim from the home. These are the cats that develop stress-related illness as a result of the constant, unavoidable threat that the bully represents.

Signs of bullying include

- Staring
- Claiming resting places or access to owners by physically pushing another cat away
- Pouncing on another cat while he is asleep
- Blocking thoroughfares, sitting directly in front of the cat flap to deny entry/exit

Blocking access to an indoor litter tray

- How to combat bullying in a multi-cat household
- Provide all 'cat resources' – feeding areas, water bowls, litter trays, beds, toys, scratching posts, high perches and private places – in the formula 'one per cat plus one extra, positioned in different locations' to limit competition. If separate social splinter groups have been identified and space is limited, then 'one per social group plus one extra' may be sufficient
- Provide dry food for 'grazing' throughout the day or divide wet food into frequent smaller meals to avoid competition at set mealtimes. Position the bowls to enable each cat to eat without the need to turn his back on a potential adversary
- Provide indoor litter facilities, even if the cats have access outside
- Provide two separate entry and exit points to the property, i.e. cat flaps, doors or windows, to avoid the risk of guarding or blocking and enable even the most timid cat to get indoors and outdoors unhindered

Despotic behaviour – territorial aggression

Probably the most emotionally heated problems I have to deal with in my role as a cat behaviour counsellor is the kind of bullying that takes place outside the home, with the victims being cats belonging to neighbours or even strangers living in another street. These bullies are often described as 'despotic' and their modus operandi is to actively seek out territory defended by others to claim it as their own. They will even enter houses, located over a wide area, attack the resident cat – and the owners if they get in the way – and spray mark vertical surfaces with urine before departing. Some pedigrees, such as the Burmese and more recently the Bengal, represent a surprisingly large

percentage of the reported perpetrators. Entire tom cats are also likely to be included in this list of feline despots, together with any domestic moggy – despots are all usually male – that takes his territoriality seriously. The victim's owner demands that steps are taken by the owner of the bully, believing that person to be solely responsible for preventing future attacks. It is entirely appropriate that these measures are put in place but the unpopular truth, whether we like it or not, is that the victim's owner should also take reasonable steps to protect his or her property if the cat is unable to deter intruders or defend its territory.

Tackling a neighbourhood despot

- Ensure that the despotic cat is neutered. If there is no evidence of an owner, it may be possible to request assistance for humane trapping, neutering and rehoming. Remember you must make reasonable endeavours to find the owner in instances like this, as neutering someone else's cat can constitute criminal damage in the eyes of the law
- Confine the despotic cat indoors at night if the fighting and property invasion occurs during dawn and dusk or the hours of darkness. Feeding the cat a late-night treat may be sufficient incentive to come in by a certain time
- Inform the neighbours that the despotic cat is confined during these hours so that they know when their own cats are safe – or vice versa by confining during the day if the cat is nocturnal in his habits
- Ensure there are sufficient warm beds around the house to give the cat every opportunity for relaxation in a comfortable setting
- Provide plenty of stimulation indoors – active play sessions etc – to use up energy, particularly early morning and evening when he is most active. Puzzle feeding should be introduced, incorporating a number of permanent feeding stations indoors where the cat can experience a little more challenge in the acquisition of his food
- Other resources such as high perches, scratching posts, private places and novel treat food should also be provided to give the despot a sense of abundance of everything important in his own core area

- The neighbour – owner of the victim – should install an exclusive entry system cat flap, ie magnetic, electronic or microchip-operated
- The despotic cat should have a couple of bells attached to his collar so neighbours and their cats can hear him coming and take any necessary action
- The owner of the victim should – in the first instance – block up the cat flap, with a solid board over both aspects, and give their cat only escorted access to the garden. Many victims become fairly agoraphobic after a severe mauling so, in those instances, it's important to make them feel as secure as possible indoors and leave the excursions outside for another time
- An indoor litter tray should be provided for both the victim cat and the aggressor for use during any enforced confinement
- The aggressor's route into the garden should be established and blocked where possible

If you are the owner of a 'Miaow Tse Tung' – or a victim of his bullying – please seek advice and guidance from your vet who will put you in touch with a pet behaviour counsellor in your area, before things get out of hand!

Vicky Halls is a registered Veterinary Nurse, a member of the FAB's Feline Behaviour Expert Panel and author of several best-selling cat counselling books. For further information regarding these and to subscribe to Vicky's free monthly e-newsletter featuring cat behavioural articles, cats in the news, tips for cat owners and competitions, please visit her website at www.vickyhalls.net



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