

Claw-Training Your Cat

Scratching is natural for cats. It stretches all of the muscles and tendons in their toes, paws, legs, shoulders, and backs. It keeps their claws healthy and removes dead outer layers of the nail. It helps them mark their territory, both visually and with scent glands in their paws. And hey...it just plain feels good! You don't need to try to train your cat not to scratch; that will only end up making both of you cranky. All you need to do is redirect her to appropriate objects. Luckily, that's easy to do, and we're here to help you do it.

Well, what *do* you want me to scratch?

The first step in convincing your cat to leave that furniture alone is to provide her with other, more appropriate options. Scratching surfaces for cats come in all shapes and sizes, from elaborate 10-foot-tall cat trees to a simple chunk of corrugated cardboard. If your cat has already displayed inappropriate scratching behavior, put your irritation aside for a moment and take a closer look at the things she's scratching. Are they rough? Smooth? Tall or short? Vertical or horizontal? If she's displaying definite preferences, your job is half-done: look for a scratching post that emulates the objects she likes to scratch. If she likes coarse surfaces, try a rope-covered post; soft, try a carpeted post. Vertical? Try a door-hanging post or cat tree. Horizontal? Try a cardboard scratching pad that lies on the floor. If she *hasn't* scratched anything yet and you just want to make sure she doesn't start, provide her with a couple of different options: she'll let you know what she prefers.

It's generally very simple to show a cat that hasn't yet developed scratching habits where she's supposed to go. You only need one tool: a toy that has the basic design of a long ribbon attached to a stick. Just about anything will do; all you need is something that you can lead her with. When you see her starting to scratch on something you'd rather she didn't, take your toy and get her attention, and immediately lead her to her

scratching post or pad. Do this consistently until she seems to be getting the picture...it doesn't take most cats long to figure it out, and this is the easiest path to take with kittens since they learn quickly and haven't developed many preferences. Preventive training will save you a lot of hassle down the road!

Location is everything

The next step is figuring out the best place to locate your cat's new scratching pads. Again, take a look at what she's doing: there's probably a reason that she's scratching where she is. In this case, it's all about territory...she's using her claws to claim things that are important to her. Frequently, cats will scratch objects near their sleeping area, or near the entrances of rooms. Try and take it as a compliment: she's only doing it because she loves you and doesn't want anybody else horning in on her favorite person!

When you first place her scratching posts, put them right next to the objects you don't want her to scratch: she needs to know that her post is the equivalent replacement for the object she chose originally. Now make the inappropriate object unappealing for her. Cover it in double-sided tape, aluminum foil, sandpaper, or plastic carpet runner with the pointy side facing out...anything she won't want to be rubbing her paws on. You can also discourage her by using cotton balls soaked in a yucky (to her) odor – perfume or muscle rub, for instance. But you want to be careful

Pay attention to your cat's scratching habits to find out what kind of scratching post she will prefer.

If you have a kitten, train her from the start - training is a lot easier before she develops bad habits!

when you start using odors; you don't want the smell to be strong enough that she associates it with the nearby scratching post, as well.

Now that you've dissuaded her from the inappropriate stuff, introduce her to the appropriate stuff! She may figure it out on her own just by experimenting, but if she doesn't seem to understand what that thing is next to her scratching-chair, you may have to help her out a little. Do the same thing you would do for a new kitten: use a long, ribbon-like toy to lead her up the scratching post. Once she's sunk her claws into it a couple of times, she will figure it out.

Once she's using the scratching posts or pads consistently, you can gradually move them to whatever location works best for you. Like any change, you don't want to do it all at once, or you risk confusing your cat and sending her right back to her old habits. Just move the scratching post a few inches each day until it's where you want it, but try not to stray too far from the locations she picked originally. Remember, there's a reason she picked them.

In case of stubbornness...

If you've got a cat that's just uncooperative, despite all of your best efforts to get her scratching the right things, it's important to remember that unless you catch her in the act, punishment will not work. You

can't explain to her what you're punishing her for after the fact, and she will only learn to fear you. When you do catch her in the act, make a loud noise or give her a squirt from a water bottle – something that will startle her, but she won't directly associate with you. If she knows that she only gets punished when you're home, she may continue her habits when you're not around to stop her.

Make your furniture unappealing, but be careful with odors!

If you are at your wit's end and training just isn't working, try to avoid turning to declawing as a solution. Educate yourself about the procedure: it is an extensive, serious series of amputations, equivalent to removal of the entire last joint on every finger in human beings, and more often than not a cat that undergoes the procedure will suffer physical and psychological damage that it would otherwise have been spared. The threat of scratched furniture will be gone, but many other behavioral problems frequently arise, including heightened aggression and a refusal to use the litter box.

Rather than declawing, try trimming your cat's claws, or give rubber nail caps a try! Both of these options are safe, economical, simple, and allow your cat to continue all of his natural, daily routines without doing any damage to your furniture, carpets, or drapes.

Remember:

Scratching is natural and healthy for a cat, and declawing takes that away. Always exhaust other options to correct inappropriate scratching.