



PENINSULA HUMANE SOCIETY

Advocating quality and compassion for all life

HANDLING AND GENTLING

Seeing a young kitten play or an adult cat snooze in the sun, it is sometimes difficult to remember that this “pet” is an animal. In other words, her behavior is potentially dangerous. In fact, about 10% of the P.H.S. Animal Behavior Hotline calls are about cats who bite and scratch people.

A cat needs to be gentled for two reasons. First, she must learn not to harm humans. Most cats are not very big, but they have five weapons, and they are extremely fast when they use them. An angry or scared cat will grab hold with the front claws, scratch with the back claws and then dig in with the teeth. They seldom cause serious bodily harm or life-threatening injuries. However, the victim of a cat attack is usually left scared and frightened. Secondly, a cat who has not been gentled is likely to react badly when she is handled by strangers; a routine vaccination can be an absolute nightmare. For a cat who is seriously ill and has to be admitted to a clinic, the psychological trauma of the strange surroundings and regular handling can cause the cat’s condition to worsen. Why subject the poor animal to this needless suffering? Instead, you can teach Kitty that not only is human handling non-threatening, but also, it is actually quite pleasurable.

Gentling Exercises

The ultimate, ideal goal of these exercises is that if a stranger approached a sleeping cat, he could tug her tail, gently hold a paw, pick it up and give it a squeeze, restrain her by the scruff, lay her down, roll her over, and pat her stomach and the cat would not mind. Of course, for goodness’ sake, do not harass the cat in this fashion each time she falls asleep.

At first you should be the one to try these exercises. Once the cat is comfortable being handled by you, teach the children in the family how to handle her. Then ask cat-person friends to perform the same exercises.

Bites and Scratches

The cat must be taught that she should never bite or scratch humans and that she should not struggle when restrained. When cats become overly excited during play with humans they usually bite and start to scratch. Whenever the cat gets her claws out or bites, tone down the play session or play possum for a few seconds. If kitty retracts her claws, praise her and resume playing. If not, try making a hissing sound with your breath. This is cat language for “Back Off!” and many cats will get the message. If she still continues to play roughly, walk away from her and isolate her for a few minutes. This is a big punishment for a playful cat, and she will soon learn that the play session will not resume until she puts her claws away.

Praise your cat whenever she plays gently with you. Let her know that this is good behavior. If she knows clearly what she is supposed to do, she will be better able to understand what she is not supposed to do.

Encourage your cat to play as roughly as she likes with an appropriate toy. She can vent her prey-killing instincts to her heart’s content on an old stuffed animal or a sock stuffed with newspaper and a little catnip.



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Handling

If your cat is touchy about being handled, start these exercises when she is tired. Most cats are pretty relaxed in the early afternoon. Initially, handle her in ways that she finds pleasurable, such as scratching behind her ear and stroking the top of her head and along the back. Lengthen the strokes to include more of the cat's body. Stroke down the hind legs and the tail. Stroke along the side of her body. See if the cat will roll onto her side, or completely roll over to accept a tummy rub. Use one finger to stroke along the top of the front legs. Use plenty of praise and reassurance and an occasional food treat. Work slowly and try to gradually increase the area of the cat's body that may be stroked.

Within a very short handling session, you will be able to locate the cat's sensitive spots that will require additional careful attention. Usually, these are the mouth, paws, ears, and tail. When working with sensitive areas, touch the cat for just a second and reward her with a treat. Then touch her for two seconds. Gradually increase the time of contact required for a food reward. The cat will learn to tolerate prolonged contact in these areas.

Gently take hold of the cat's paw and scratch her behind the ear or feed her several treats in a row. Then let go and ignore the cat for a while. Repeat this routine a number of times. The cat will soon (or eventually) look forward to having her paw held. Carefully try to spread the toes. Continually praise and stroke the cat with the other hand as long as she appears relaxed. Examine each toe and nail.

Facing the cat, scratch her behind the ear with your fingers and use the thumb to gently fold back the inside of the ear pinna to examine inside. Similarly, when examining the mouth, continue scratching behind the ear and with the thumb gently flip up the upper lip to expose the teeth.

Restraint

It is important to teach the cat to accept restraint because there is no way that one person can successfully restrain a cat if the cat does not wish to be restrained. If restraint is necessary but the cat is unwilling, either the handler will get hurt, or the cat will be scared and stressed and may be injured.

There is very little difference between hugging and restraint. Some cats will readily accept exceedingly physical hugs from a child but will not permit themselves to be restrained by a veterinarian. Cats are less inclined to accept restraint from strangers, especially if the stranger reaches for the cat in a cold, businesslike fashion.

Prepare Kitty for both regular and unexpected trips to the veterinarian. When something pleasant is about to happen to your cat, such as mealtime, treats, play, or affection, say to her, "Want a hug?" and then pick her up, supporting and cradling her body with one arm and wrapping your other arm in front of the cat's neck to hold her by the scruff. Have other family members and friends do the same. The cat will learn that it is fun to be restrained (hugged). When a stranger needs to restrain the cat, he/she should ask in a friendly voice if she wants a hug, so the cat knows what is going on and will be less likely to react adversely.

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