Keeping Them at Home: Using Behavior Counseling to Save More Cats’ Lives

Matt Wildman
Vice President of Community Engagement
Door #1

Door #2
4 adoption centers & 10 offsite kiosks: 3700 adoptions

ACO services for 15 communities

Community assistance: helpline, food bank, TNR, vaccine clinics, DV fosters

Professional development

Dog Training & Behavior Center
ST. HUBERT’S SISTER SHELTER WAYSTATION PROGRAM

Connecting Places of Opportunity with Areas of Need

Source (purple) and Destination (blue) Partner Locations

St. Hubert’s
Animal Welfare Center

www.sthuberts.org
Does this Sound Familiar?
If you are a cat owner experiencing a cat behavior issue, where can you turn?
Why Cat Behavior Counseling Works

- Supporting clients goes a long way
- Cats are predictable - it’s all about understanding *their* needs
- Minimal time expenditure with a big payoff
CAT BEHAVIOR COUNSELING

Providing Support & Being an Ally

Helping Clients Understand Their Cat’s Behavior

Thorough Investigation Into the Cats’ Behavior
Providing Support & Being an Ally

Helping Clients Understand Their Cat’s Behavior

Thorough Investigation Into the Cats’ Behavior
Hi Janice,

I am a cat behavior expert and I provide free behavior counseling. I would be happy to talk with you to discuss your cat’s behavior. I have questions to ask so that I can better assess the situation so it's best to talk on the phone. Is there a good day/time to call you? What's your number?

Looking forward to talking.

Sincerely,

Matt Wildman
Hi Holly,

I am a cat behavior expert and I provide free behavior counseling. I would be happy to talk with you to discuss your cat's behavior. I have questions to ask so that I can better assess the situation so it's best to talk on the phone. I can be reached from 9 am to 8 pm EST at (347) 938-7692.

Looking forward to talking.

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Which is more effective in getting a response?

A. Is there a good day/time to call you? What's your number?

B. I can be reached from 9 am to 8 pm EST at (347) 938-7692.
Which is more effective in getting a response?

A. Is there a good day/time to call you? What's your number?  
90% response rate

B. I can be reached from 9 am to 8 pm EST at (347) 938-7692.  
10% response rate
SUPPORT

• Disregarding assumptions that get in the way of support.

• Being proactive: Make it as easy as possible for cat owners to get the support they need as soon as possible.

• Always be mindful of the fact that people are contacting us when they are in crisis and under stress.
“I’m calling to find out where I can bring my cat. I need to get rid of him. He keeps pissing all over my apartment.”
Then...

**Norma:** “You don’t want to help me. All you’re doing is asking questions.” *Click*

**Me:** Immediately called back and Norma’s adult daughter answers. “Hi, I was talking to Norma about her cat and I think we got disconnected.”

**Adult daughter:** Yells, “Mom, it’s about the cat.” Three second pause. *Click*
How do you respond to that?

A. Shake head, say to self, “Some people just stink,” and move on with day.

B. Call back, and if anyone answers yell at them about how rude they are before they hang up on you again.

C. Try to figure something else out.
How do you respond to that?

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NORMA & PEBBLES

Outcome

• **E-mail from shelter:** “Norma’s cat recovered well and is no longer urinating outside the box. Norma called to express her gratitude.”

• **Norma:** “I’m so glad you called. Thank you for putting me in touch with the shelter. Pebbles is doing great. His bloodwork was normal, except for his kidney levels were a little elevated ...”
WHAT WE HEAR

• “I want to get rid of this cat.”

• “I don’t want my cat anymore. Will you take her?”

• “This cat is too much trouble. When can I drop her off?”

• “If someone doesn’t pick up this cat, I’m throwing her out on the street!”
What’s often being expressed:
Take a deep breath...
AN EFFECTIVE APPROACH

“I understand how frustrating that must be for your cat to pee outside the box. The good news is that usually litter box issues are resolvable and sometimes the solution is actually fairly simple. I realize you are very upset with your cat, but it sounds like you also really love him and you’ve obviously taken good care of him all these years. I’d really like to help you to try to resolve the problem so you can keep him. Does that sound okay?”
SUPPORTING THE CAT OWNER

- Non-judgmental approach
- Empathize
- Lend hope
- Remind of the bond with the cat
- Be an ally
Does this Sound Familiar?
5 minutes into call:

“I really do love her and she is so spoiled.”
CAT BEHAVIOR COUNSELING

- Providing Support & Being an Ally
- Helping Clients Understand Their Cat’s Behavior
- Thorough Investigation Into the Cats’ Behavior
THREE CAT BEHAVIOR STORIES

• Taino the cat & Bubba the dog

• Gay the human & Storm the cat

• Anthony the human & Georgie the cat
Cats are solitary hunters who live in an established territory and are also potential prey.
Specific needs associated with being . . .

- Territorial
- Predators
- Prey
TAINO & BUBBA

Cast of Characters

Bubba & Sweetie

Bert

Taino
THE OTHER MAIN CHARACTER
TAINO & BUBBA
What can we learn from my misfortune?
Taino’s Teachings:

1. The absolute need for cats to feel safe & secure.

2. Cats and humans perceive the world very differently.

3. Cats don’t act “out of the blue,” and are in fact “Masters of Communication.”
SAFETY & SECURITY

SAFETY: No perceived threat to well-being.

SECURITY: The cat perceives his territory as . . .
- Familiar
- Predictable
- Providing choice

A sense of control
SAFETY & SECURITY

What does a cat experience when she feels unsafe and insecure?
- Defensive posturing and aggression
- Compulsive behaviors
- Hiding and withdrawal
- Loss of appetite and health issues
- Marking and inappropriate elimination

Stress is my #1 enemy.
SAFETY & SECURITY

What could I have done to provide Taino with a sense of safety and security?
Don’t forget the value of positive associations. And some interactive play would have been useful.
Cats’ perceptions of the world are very different from our own.

Bubba is no big deal, Taino.

That’s what you think!
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observed Behavior</th>
<th>Owner’s Assessment</th>
<th>The Reality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cat is peeing on owner’s bed when owner is on vacation</td>
<td>Cat is being spiteful</td>
<td>Cat is likely stressed and/or ill, or there is a problem with the litter box set up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cat is hissing at the new baby</td>
<td>Cat is jealous</td>
<td>Cat is fearful and saying “leave me alone.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cat is hissing and swatting when approached by people</td>
<td>Cat is attacking</td>
<td>Cat is fearful and seeking to create distance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cat is mean</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cat is pouncing on people at various times throughout the day, but is otherwise friendly and social</td>
<td>Cat “suddenly attacks”</td>
<td>Cat is likely understimulated / bored and needs interactive play</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CATS ARE
“MASTERS OF COMMUNICATION”

It’s entirely inaccurate to say I acted “out of the blue.”
“MASTERS OF COMMUNICATION”

- **Friendly**
  - Head high
  - Tail high, not bristled

- **Aggressive**
  - Tail hangs straight down

- **Defensive**
  - Tail curved down and bristled

- **Fearful**
  - Tail raised and bristled
“MASTERS OF COMMUNICATION”

- **Very Happy To See You**
- **Friendly/Content**
- **Friendly But Unsure**
- **Non-threatening, Unsure**
- **Amicable, Not Fearful Or Aggressive**
- **Potentially Aggressive**
- **Defensive Aggression**
- **Submissive**
- **Alert, Interested**
- **Excited, Angry, Or Irritable**
- **Derisive**
- **Angry**
GAY & STORM
GAY & STORM

Early September
GAY & STORM

Early September
GAY & STORM

Mid September
Mid September
MOVING AT THE SPEED OF CAT
How long will it take my cat to adjust?

A. 7 to 10 days

B. There’s no way to know, but you can do things to facilitate the process.

C. Probably a month, maybe two.

D. If you don’t see progress within two weeks, the cat’s probably a lost cause.
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MOVING AT THE SPEED OF CAT

• There is no timetable when it comes to a cat developing a sense of safety and security in their environment.

• The pace of adjustment must be dictated by the cat.

• The humans are responsible for ensuring that the cat has a consistent sense of control and choice over their environment.
MOVING AT THE SPEED OF CAT

Patience almost always pays off with us cats.

Trust the process.
Providing Support & Being an Ally

Helping Clients Understand Their Cat’s Behavior

Thorough Investigation Into the Cats’ Behavior
Anthony "Gets" His Cat
CATS DON’T MISBEHAVE

What’s right?
What’s wrong?
CATS DON’T MISBEHAVE

A cat’s “misbehavior” is in reality a cat’s rational response to their environment. It’s their attempt to meet their needs.
CATS DON’T MISBEHAVE
What is the #1 source of cat “misbehavior”?

A. Medical issues  
B. Spite & jealousy  
C. Understimulation  
D. Lack of socialization
What is the #1 source of cat “misbehavior”?

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D. Lack of socialization
Why cats need stimulation:

- Outlet for normal cat energy (satisfies prey drive)
- Decreases stress
- Increases confidence
Behavior issues that arise when cats are understimulated:

- Unwanted behaviors:
  - Play aggression towards people/other animals
  - Climbing and scratching throughout home
  - Overactivity at night
  - Increased likelihood of darting outside home

- Boredom:
  - Overeating, lethargy, compulsive behaviors, depression
STIMULATING CATS THROUGH INTERACTIVE PLAY!
HELPING CAT OWNERS UNDERSTAND THEIR CATS
Providing Support & Being an Ally

Helping Clients Understand Their Cat’s Behavior

Thorough Investigation Into the Cats’ Behavior
“Cat behavior counseling entails a thorough investigation into the cat’s behavior and home environment.”

—Sherlock Holmes (maybe)
Message left on helpline:

“Hi, my name is Tonya and my cat, Melon, is peeing all over my house. If this doesn’t stop, I’m bringing her to the shelter.”
When gathering information, what should be your first step?

A. Ask questions to understand what it is the cat is actually doing.

B. Ask questions about the home environment.

C. Ask questions about where and when Tonya got her cat.

D. Ask questions about when was the last time the cat went to the vet.
When gathering information, what should be your first step?

A. Ask questions to understand what it is the cat is actually doing.

B. Ask questions about the home environment.

C. Ask questions about where and when Tonya got her cat.

D. Ask questions about when was the last time the cat went to the vet.
“The Cat Is Peeing Everywhere”
“The Cat Is Peeing Everywhere”
Questions to understand what Melon is doing:

- Where and how often is Melon urinating outside the box?
- Is she also defecating outside the box?
- How often is she using the litter box?
- Does there seem to be a pattern as to when this behavior occurs? Time of day? When home alone?
- How long has this problem existed?
Problem: Melon has been both defecating and urinating outside of her litter box. She eliminates in two rooms, Tonya’s bedroom and the living room when Tonya is not present. She eliminates on the carpet in both rooms.

How Long: About six months

How Often: When the problem first began Melon was avoiding the box one to two times a week, but at this point she’s avoiding the box once every day or every other day.
4 REASONS CATS AVOID THE LITTER BOX

- Medical Issue
- Problem with the Litter Box Set Up
- Environmental Stressor(s)
- Tensions in a Multi-Cat Household
MEDICAL ISSUE

Age: 10
Last vet visit: 8 years ago
Weight: Reported good weight
Appetite: Healthy appetite
Activity Level: Normal
Other: No evidence of blood in urine or stool; no straining; stool looks normal.
The first step with any litter box issue is to refer the cat owner to a veterinarian to determine a potential medical issue.

A. Absolutely, positively, yes!

B. Now, hold on a minute, let’s wait to hear what the man has to say.
The first step with any litter box issue is to refer the cat owner to a veterinarian to determine a potential medical issue.

A. Absolutely, positively, yes!

B. Now, hold on a minute, let’s wait to hear what the man has to say.
Established protocol is to first visit the vet, however . . .

Practical considerations have to be taken into account.
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LITTER BOX SET UP

Number of Litter boxes: One

Location: In the basement

Type of Litterbox: Large open box

Scooping Frequency: “Usually once a day”

Litter Type: Unscented scoopable litter (same brand)
Which litter box best meets a cat’s needs?

A.

B.

C.

D.
Which litter box best meets a cat’s needs?

A. 
B. 
C. 
D.
Geez. Where’d you find a litter box this big?
Litter box set up:

- Large, open box
- In an open, accessible area with multiple escape routes
- Unscented, scoopable litter
- Box is scooped twice a day and cleaned every 10-14 days
ENVIRONMENTAL STRESSOR(S)

Melon is kept strictly indoors.

Potential indoor stressors: None of note

Potential outdoor stressors: Neighbor has a new cat who roams outdoors. Melon’s perch is by the window and she seems very focused on the outdoor cat when she sees her.
ENVIRONMENTAL STRESSOR(S)  
(A brief list)

- Visitors
- Vacuum cleaner
- New pet
- New perfume
- New couch
- New baby
- Upstairs neighbor playing electric guitar
- Smells of other animals brought into home on clothing
- Person displaying strong, atypical emotions

- Change in work schedule
- Outdoor cats
- Outdoor construction
- Mice or other animals in walls
- Illness (feeling vulnerable)
- Vet visit
- Old age (deteriorating senses / feeling vulnerable)
- Left alone with cat sitter
- Workers in home
Tonya did adopt a second cat, a one year old named Mylo, about six months ago.

Once or twice a day Tonya will see Mylo try to play with Melon, but Melon responds by swatting or hissing and walks away. A few times Mylo has pounced on Melon “like he wanted to wrestle,” and Melon hissed, ran and hid.
Tensions among cats can lead to:

- Urine marking
- Bully cat may intimidate other cat(s) by positioning himself in pathway to litter box
- Bully cat and/or an understimulated cat may pounce on other cat(s) as they enter / exit the litter box or its surrounding area.
WHAT’S OUR ASSESSMENT?
ASSESSMENT

May have an undetected medical issue.

Medical Issue

Problem with the Litter Box Set Up

Environmental Stressor(s)

Tensions in a Multi-Cat Household

May be avoiding a dirty litter box and/or an inaccessible litter box.

May not feel safe going into basement.

May fear getting ambushed
ADVICE – THOROUGH & PRACTICAL

Vet visit if behavior continues despite advice implemented.

Add at least one large, open box on main floor. Scoop all boxes 2X / day.

- Medical Issue
- Problem with the Litter Box Set Up
- Environmental Stressor(s)
- Tensions in a Multi-Cat Household

Cover window; move perch; Interactive play.

Ensure Mylo is properly stimulated.
There’s no need to follow up with Tonya. If she needs help, she’ll reach out to us.

A. True
B. False
There’s no need to follow up with Tonya. If she needs help, she’ll reach out to us.

A. True

B. False
Why follow-up is so important, Reason #1

The client may need to be reminded and/or encouraged to implement the advice.
Why follow-up is so important, Reason #2

The client may have implemented the advice, but the behavior issue is unresolved and further guidance is needed.
Why follow-up is so important, Reason #3

The client may have implemented the advice & the behavior issue is resolving, but she needs ongoing support.
KNOW WHEN PROFESSIONAL HELP IS NEEDED

Certified Cat Behavior Consultants: https://iaabc.org/consultants

Veterinary Behaviorists: Typically connected with emergency / specialized veterinary hospitals and/or veterinary schools.
WRAP UP: CAT BEHAVIOR COUNSELING

Providing Support & Being an Ally
- Proactive
- Non-judgmental
- Supportive
- Realistic / Practical
- On-going

Helping Clients Understand Their Cat’s Behavior
- Safety & security
- Differing Perspectives
- Cats’ Communication
- Moving at the speed of cat
- Stimulation

Thorough Investigation into the Cats’ Behavior
- Asking lots of questions
- Not making assumptions
  - Following-up

St. Hubert’s Animal Welfare Center
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

• HSUS: www.animalsheltering.org/catbehavior

• International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants: www.iaabc.org

• Indoor Pet Initiative http://indoorpet.osu.edu/cats/resources/

• Pam Johnson-Bennett’s website www.catbehaviorassociates.com

• Matt Wildman: mwildman@sthuberts.org
QUESTIONS?
Thanks for attending!

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