



Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA

Handling & Gentling

Seeing a young kitten play or an adult cat snooze in the sun, it is sometimes difficult to imagine that this pet can potentially harm or injure us. In fact, about 10% of the PHS/SPCA Behavior Helpline calls are about cats who bite or scratch people.

A cat needs to be “gentled” for two reasons. First, she must learn not to harm humans. Cats 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 scarred and scared. Second, a cat who has not been gentled is likely to react badly when handled by strangers; a routine vaccination can be a nightmare. For a cat who is ill and has to be admitted to a clinic, the psychological trauma of the strange surroundings and handling can cause the cat’s condition to worsen. Why subject the poor animal to this needless suffering? Instead, teach Kitty that not only is human handling non-threatening, but that it can be quite pleasurable.

Gentling Exercises

The ideal goal of these exercises would be to have a sleeping cat accept the following behaviors if approached by a stranger: tugging her tail, gently holding a paw, restraining her by the scruff, laying her down, rolling her over, and patting her stomach. Of course, never 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 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 may bite and scratch. Whenever the cat gets her claws out or bites, tone down the play 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!” If she still continues to play too roughly, walk away from her and isolate her for a few minutes. This is a punishment for a playful cat, and she will learn that the play session will not resume until she puts her claws away.

Praise your cat whenever she plays gently. Let her know this is good behavior. If she knows 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 on an old stuffed animal or a sock stuffed with newspaper and a little catnip.

Handling

If your cat is touchy about being handled, start these exercises when she is tired. Most cats are relaxed in the early afternoon. Initially, handle her in ways she finds pleasurable (i.e. scratching behind her ear, stroking the top of her head and along the back) Lengthen the strokes. 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 roll over to accept a tummy rub. Use one finger to stroke along the top of the front legs. Use plenty of praise, 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; usually, 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, 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 a paw and either scratch behind the ear or feed several treats. Then let go and ignore the cat for a while. Repeat this a number of times.



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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 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, the handler will get hurt, or the cat will be scared, 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 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.

For more info, call our free Behavior Helpline (650/340-7022 x783 or, for Spanish, x786) or consider a low-cost consultation. To make a consultation appointment, call 650/340-7022 x667. The PHS/SPCA Behavior Department, like many shelter programs, is funded by donations.