

How to Deal With Your Cat's Claws

by Jean B. Townsend

One of the cat's most distinctive features are his claws. He can extend them in a flash to slash out at an enemy or to climb to safety. But misdirected, his claws can be a source of annoyance to his owner. Below are some hints to help you channel your cat's claws in the right direction.

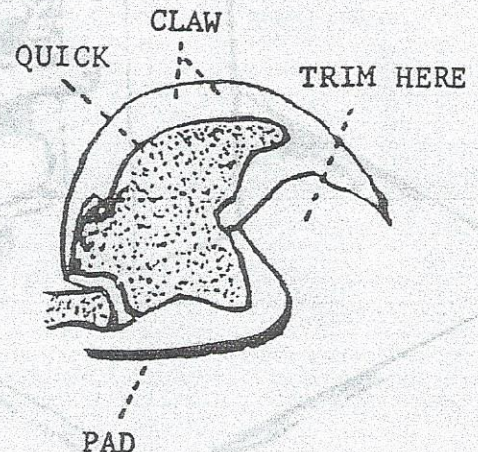
You will be better able to train or re-train your cat if you understand why he claws things. Cats claw for three reasons:

1. To sharpen or condition the nails — a cat claws a rough surface to file his nails smooth, just as we use an emery board.
2. To mark territory — a cat marks off an area, such as the inside of the house, to reassure himself that he has a safe place to exist. One way he brands his territory is by regularly clawing several spots in the area to leave both a visible and a scent mark. He also can mark territory by urination and by head or cheek rubbing.
3. To exercise and have fun — cats experience considerable pleasure and a sense of power from their feet and claws. They enjoy the act of clawing and derive some exercise from it as well.

TRAINING YOUR CAT The three-point program below will work either to train a kitten or young cat or to re-train an adult cat who already has bad habits.

1. Trim your cat's nails regularly. For best results, use a pair of pet nail trimmers such as Miller's Forge Dog Nail Scissors (available at many pet supply shops). Sit the cat in your lap as you'd hold a baby and take a front foot between your thumb and forefinger. Gently press on the toes until the claws extend. You will see a dark red wedge-shaped vein running down through the transparent claw (see diagram). Just trim off the nail to about 1/8 inch or more ahead of that vein. If in doubt, cut just beyond where the nail curves the most, or remove just the transparent tip. You could also ask your veterinarian to show you how to clip nails.

If you do happen to cut the quick, plunge the nail into a bar of soap to stop the bleeding, or wrap the nail in a cold



compress. Remember, cats dislike being restrained, so the more relaxed you are, the easier your job will be. Keep the sessions fun since you will be doing this for the rest of the cat's life.

Adult cats need their front nails clipped every week or so and their back nails trimmed less often. Kittens under four months of age may need to have their nails clipped as often as every four or five days. It is best to wake a kitten up or catch him when he is quiet so that he'll cooperate.

2. Buy or make two scratching posts which the cat will use. Your cat will claw something — it is up to you to find a place that is mutually acceptable to you and the cat. "But I have a scratching post and he won't use it!" you say. Why not look at what is wrong with the post rather than what is wrong with the cat?

Most of the readily available scratching posts are two feet tall, wobbly, and covered with shag carpet. Even an 8-week old kitten cannot get a decent workout on a marvel of micro-engineering like that! Look at what your cat already is scratching — perhaps the sofa. The sofa is nice and tall, sturdy, and covered with a nubby tweed. Try to duplicate whatever he already is clawing in the scratching post you get.

Build or buy a post at least 40 inches tall on a sturdy base (2' x 2') and covered with a tightly-woven nubby carpet like the nylon commercial grade carpet used in many offices. (See diagram.)

Better still, build or buy a floor-to-ceiling carpeted climbing tree, especially if your cat is a climber.

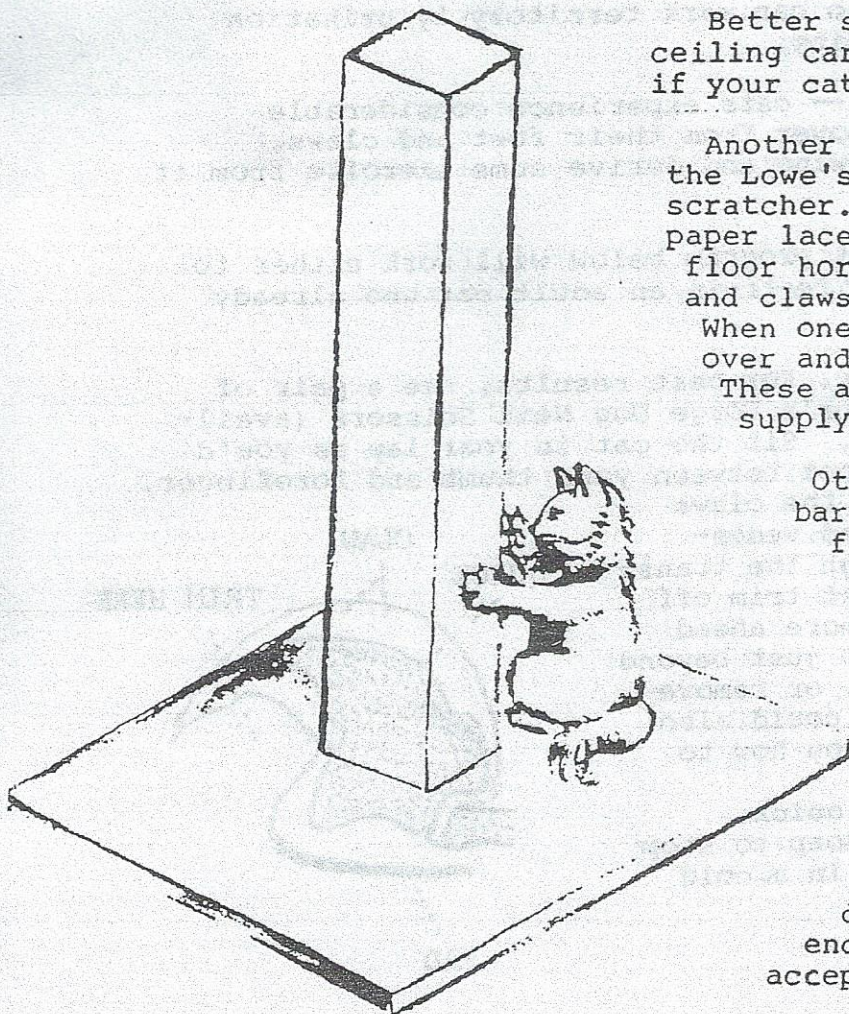
Another effective type of scratcher is the Lowe's or Vo-Toys corrugated paper scratcher. This is a block of corrugated paper laced with catnip which lies on the floor horizontally. The cat sits on it and claws as he would on a tree root.

When one side wears out, you turn the post over and let the cat use the other side.

These are available inexpensively at pet supply shops.

Other ideas include using a rough-barked log (either mounted on a platform or placed on its side), a wicker hamper, the jute back of a carpet sample, and covering a door jamb or basement post with carpet.

Put one post right beside where the cat currently is clawing and put the other one near where he sleeps. Often the cat will stretch and claw just after awakening. Posts in different areas of the house will encourage him to mark territory in acceptable places.



3. Train your cat to claw where he is supposed to. Put your cat on the new scratching post and move his paws. If he claws, pet him and encourage him. If he claws where he shouldn't, yell NO! and put him on his post.

If your cat is clawing your upholstered furniture, buy a yard of clear Contact paper at the hardware store. Then cut large patches of the paper and stick them directly on the places on the furniture that the cat is clawing. This keeps him from freshening up the scent and visual marks he has been making. Place one of his scratching posts nearby so that you can "wean" him off the furniture and onto the post.

Some people have found a squirt pistol effective. Fill a plant sprayer with water and set it on "stream." Just wait for the cat to come along and claw. While he is in the act of clawing, run a few drops of water up his back and say nothing. Hopefully, he will think that the sofa or chair squirted him. A few shots like this and he will soon catch on that furniture-clawing is unpleasant.

Other people report good results with loud noises made while the cat is in the act of clawing — like dropping a bag full of empty cans or sounding a loud bell or buzzer (like your smoke detector buzzer). But this (and the water treatment, incidentally) must be done consistently at first so that the cat always gets the noise (or water) when he claws where he shouldn't.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE A KITTEN? Ideally, you will not acquire a kitten until he is about three or four months old, has already learned to use a scratching post, and has run off some of his kitten energy with his littermates. But, most likely, your kitten is a very immature two months old.

Kittens at this age cause problems with their claws because they are too small to leap up to sit with you so they shinny up the front of the sofa. Or they leap onto the dining room chair, overshoot their mark, and dig in to prevent falling off. Or they are so full of energy that you get scratched just trying to cuddle them.

Basically, all you need to do is follow the three-point program already outlined above. But some kittens also climb drapes and furniture. If your kitten is a climber, it is important that you provide a tall post or climbing tree as soon as possible where he can channel these tendencies. To protect your drapes, make a "rug" of Contact paper placed sticky side up where the kitten would have to stand to start up the drapes. Or wrap the bottoms of the drapes in dry cleaner bags until you feel the kitten has forgotten about climbing them.

You should also temporarily cover your furniture. Drape your upholstered furniture with sheets or throws and tie them at the legs to be sure the kitten doesn't crawl up underneath. Lay magazines or newspaper sections on wood chairs or tables where the kitten is likely to jump. Obviously, you do not want to live like this forever. But these steps will protect your furniture until the kitten has matured some. People with babies and even puppies must take steps to protect the house. Kittens go through a destructive childhood, too, only it is not as well publicized or accepted!

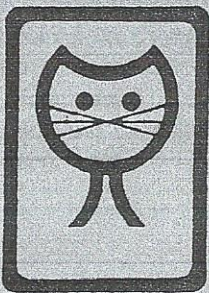
WHY NOT JUST DECLAW THE CAT? In the first place, if you follow the steps recommended above, declawing your cat is not necessary. Why do unnecessary, costly, and possibly hazardous surgery just to correct a training problem?

When a cat is declawed, the veterinarian anesthetizes the cat and amputates the last joint of each toe. Most people believe that only the claw is removed, but this is not true. Part of the bone is removed also to prevent the claw from regrowing. The healing process can be plagued with complications such as hemorrhage, bone chips which prevent healing, damage (either permanent or temporary) to the radial nerve, pain, and later, nails which may regrow abnormally. The cat no longer is able to balance quite as he used to and must be kept indoors because he no longer can adequately defend himself. Some veterinarians refuse to perform the surgery because they feel it is cruel and inhumane. Most cat organizations prohibit declawed cats from being shown because they also feel that declawing is cruel.

There can be emotional complications from declawing, too. Nature endowed the cat with claws as a first line of defense and escape. It stands to reason that if you tamper with such a vital survival mechanism, there will be emotional repercussions. Some veterinarians observe that declawed cats develop chronic bladder and skin problems soon after they have been declawed as a result of their insecurity. Very often declawed cats resort to biting whenever they feel threatened — which can be often when they know their claws are gone. Some become chronic wetters and urinate (and even defecate) outside their litter pan when they become anxious. They can't mark territory to reassure themselves by clawing any more, so they resort to urinating. Many declawed cats become hysterical when they are taken to the veterinarian's office.

There are several misconceptions about declawing. Many people feel that declawing a cat makes it safer to be around babies or children. This is not true because of the declawed cat's tendency to become a biter and more neurotic. Also, people feel that if they have one declawed cat, any additional cat also must be declawed so it won't take advantage of the declawed one. Actually, when cats fight with each other, they bite more than they claw. Once the cats know and accept each other, there will be very little fighting so the claws should not be a problem.

People who have their cats declawed usually do not understand how important physically or emotionally the claws are to the cat and do not know how else to cope with the problem. Cats have claws for a reason! With a little work and commitment to your cat's welfare, you will eliminate the excuse to declaw your cat and make him a better pet as well.



Maryland Feline Society, Inc.
P. O. Box 144
Lutherville, Maryland 21093