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Cats need training, not declawing

Q. I adopted an 8-week-old tabby kitten from the animal shelter and he is a ball of energy, to say the very least. He climbs the curtains, the couches and anyone's leg that happens to pass by whenever he is

in a playful mood - which, by the way, is his every waking moment. At night, he thinks it is great fun to attack my nose or get tangled in my hair while I am sleeping. I haven't had a decent night's sleep since he came home. Now, I love my new kitten

- but things have got to change. I just need to know what to do because I've never dealt with anything like this before. Should I get him declawed? He's going to be an indoor cat only, so he won't need to defend himself against anything, and that way my couch and curtains (not to mention everyone's legs!) will survive his kittenhood. Your advice will be greatly appreciated.

Lauren,
Huntington Beach

Dear Lauren,

Kittens have definitely mastered the art of playtime. It is so much fun to watch and join in with little cats when they are in their feisty moods. Nonetheless, it is as important with young cats as it is

with dogs to teach them from an early age what is OK and what is unacceptable.

This can be achieved through training, and a heck of a lot of patience. Declawing is not only unnecessary; it is in my opinion inhumane and barbaric. The process of declawing involves amputating the last joint of each of your cat's toes, which radically changes the shape of your cat's feet, affecting everything he does from that point on. Furthermore, as much as everyone will try and tell you that it's no big deal, the bottom line is that the procedure is painful. (Imagine having the tips of all your fingers and toes amputated!) Occasionally, serious physical complications arise as a result of the surgery, and at the very least, cats suffer emotionally.

More than 20 countries in Europe, as well as Australia and New Zealand, have outlawed the cruel practice of declawing cats. Sadly, it's still done here in the United States for the convenience of people who have no clue how painful the procedure is, or who are just too impatient to wait for their cats to learn good behavior.

Obviously, you don't want your curtains, furniture and legs shredded, so you need to begin training immediately. The first thing you need to do is invest in a couple of cat trees that are at least as tall as a full-grown feline when he stands

on his hind legs. If you have space for taller cat trees with platforms, that is even better. Be sure to place the climbing toys in the rooms where your kitty is most active.

Once you have the cat trees in place, take some time and play with your kitten on and around the trees. Use toys on strings to entice him to climb. You'll be surprised how fast he will get the idea, especially if you are there playing with him and praising him.

He will, unfortunately, continue climbing on the curtains and the sofas - so you will need to be ready with squirt bottles strategically placed where you can grab them quickly and send a sudden spray his direction while he is engaged in the forbidden activities.

Be sure and combine the use of the word "no!" with the water deterrent. Cats are smart little animals and will quickly associate the water, your tone of voice and their misbehavior. It won't take him long to learn that curtain climbing and couch scratching are not OK. Be sure and follow-up any corrective actions with taking him over to a cat tree and playing with him there.

Stalking passing legs will require a different strategy.

You may have noticed mother cats dealing with their rambunctious children - they do not put up with very much. When kittens get out of hand, immediate conse-

quences follow. If your kitten attacks, immediately grab him by the scruff, tell him "no!" and put him in a room with the door closed for a few minutes. When you let him out, if he is calm, pet him and praise him.

Use these "time-outs" as necessary, but don't leave a kitty alone in a room for long periods - a few minutes should be plenty.

Keeping him awake during the day can lessen his nighttime play bursts. If you are at work during the day, this is a problem, because he is probably sleeping while you are gone. The best thing you can do is try to take some vacation time in order to get him into the habit of staying awake during the day and sleeping at night. Any time you see him begin to doze, give him a gentle nudge. If you keep this up, he will be so tucked out by your bedtime that he will sleep all the way through the night. If you can't take a few days off work, you may want to talk to a friend or neighbor who may be in a position to help you with this.

Remember, it takes time for kittens to learn good manners - sometimes as long as two years. But once the kitten stage is over, you will miss it - so be patient and keep a good sense of humor, and enjoy your little guy.

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