

PAWS NOT CLAWS

BY AMY D. SHOJAI

KITTENS ARE TRAINABLE!

SCRATCHING THE SURFACE—CLAW TRAINING BASICS

Kittens—and adult cats—claw. It is a natural behavior, and one you will never eliminate, so don't even try. Instead, train your kitten to use a legal target so he can indulge his claw needs without risking damage to your furniture.

Remember, kittens can't read minds, and he won't know that he shouldn't claw your antique desk. It's up to you to explain in terms he can understand.

Claws are an extension of the end of each kitten toe, where two small bones rest nearly on top of each other. They are held together by tendons that create a hinge mechanism. Relaxed claws are sheathed inside a fold of skin at the end of each toe, so that the paw looks soft and smooth. Kitty straightens the hinged bones by flexing the tendon, to push the claw down and forward. That not only extends his claws, it also spreads the paw pad to nearly twice its former width. ➔



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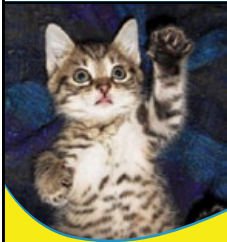
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PAWS CLAWS CONTINUED

WHY CATS CLAW

Scratching is one type of feline marking behavior. It is vitally important to the cat's health, for both physical and emotional reasons.

First of all, scratching feels good to your kitten. When he reaches outward, sinks claws into a surface, and then draws them back towards himself, he flexes and exercises his shoulder muscles. Think of clawing as kitty calisthenics that help keep his muscles toned. For that reason, cats often seem to enjoy a scratch after they wake up from a nap.

Clawing also strips away the old outer claw coverings, and reveals the sharp new nail beneath. This keeps the kitten's toes and claws healthy. Trimming his nails reduces the damage potential.

Finally, the visible claw marks communicate to the world that the target (and real estate surrounding it) is owned by Kitty. Scent glands in the paws leave similar messages. Clawing typically targets "important" places, such as near a favorite sleeping place, the food bowl, or a favored pathway like the hall into your bedroom.

The key to scratch-training your kitten is to offer him an irresistible target in the perfect location, so he doesn't feel the need to seek other options. Introduce him to the scratching post by kneeling down and pretending you're a cat—scratch the post yourself in front of him. Don't forget to tell him how good it feels, and what fun you're having. That's often enough to get Baby to test the object himself—and get hooked. You can also tease him with a feather or ribbon dangled against the scratching surface, so that when he grabs for the toy, he feels how great the scratching post is.

After choosing the right style of post, the most important training consideration is where to put it. Because clawing is a marking behavior, Kitty wants the whole world to see his scratch graffiti. Hiding the scratch post in a back room defeats the whole purpose of marking.

Think of all the reasons why your kitten claws, and use them to find the perfect location for the post. Kittens often claw more than one place in the house, too, so don't limit him to a single post—offer him several in all his favorite locations: near his bed, where he eats, and in the living room where the family gathers. He wants you to see, and admire, his scratch graffiti.

RETRAINING KITTEN CLAWS, STEP BY STEP

Now that you understand what's involved in why your kitten claws, and what she needs out of a claw object, you're ready to begin the re-training process. Don't expect to heal the problem overnight. It will take patience, and there will likely be some relapses, but with diligence, you can both be satisfied.

1. Make bad choices unattractive. Booby-trap the sofa or other prime claw targets with Sticky Paws, Feliway, or other techniques. Be creative. Cover the upholstery with surfaces kittens dislike, such as aluminum foil. Spray citrus deodorizes on your furniture—most cats dislike this scent. Spread a tiny bit of Vicks Vapo Rub on wooden surfaces, or smear it on a washcloth and drape over the fabric. The idea is to make the furniture so unattractive that Kitty makes the choice to avoid it.

2. Correct the behavior. Each time Kitty claws the wrong object, she should receive an immediate interruption and correction. That teaches her there's an unpleasant consequence to her actions. The squirt gun or shaker can may work well.

3. Choose a commercial scratching post Kitty can't resist, by reviewing her preferences. Place it directly in front of the illegal target she's used in the past. Spike the post with catnip, lure her on board with a feather toy, and praise and reward with treats when she uses it. Kittens and cats use scratching to mark all their territory—one scratching post won't be enough. You'll need a legal target in all the places Kitty feels are important, such as near her bed and food, and favorite lookout places.

4. Kittens love status quo. Any sort of change can cause stress that prompts even more scratching. Wait until Kitty has sworn scratch-allegiance to the "legal" target before moving the post, and even then, do so very gradually. The post must remain in the general vicinity or you risk the cat relapsing, and going back to the furniture. But you can move the post to a more convenient location—to the side of the sofa instead of right in front of it, for instance. Aim for moving it about five inches a day, until you reach the preferred location.

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