

## Bad, Bad Cats—Whatcha Gonna Do?

A survey helps the Animal Rescue League of Boston check up on its kitties' post-adoption behaviors

BY AMY MARDER, V.M.D., C.A.A.B.



Adopters of biting kitties should be informed of their pets' nibbling issues and educated on safe ways to interact with their feisty furballs. RACHWAL/DREAMSTIME.COM

Over the years, cats have overtaken dogs as America's favorite companion animal. More than 60 million cats are now kept and enjoyed by millions of Americans. Low-maintenance and independent—compared to their needy canine counterparts—their self-sufficient personalities have made them ideal animal companions for people living in our frenetic times.

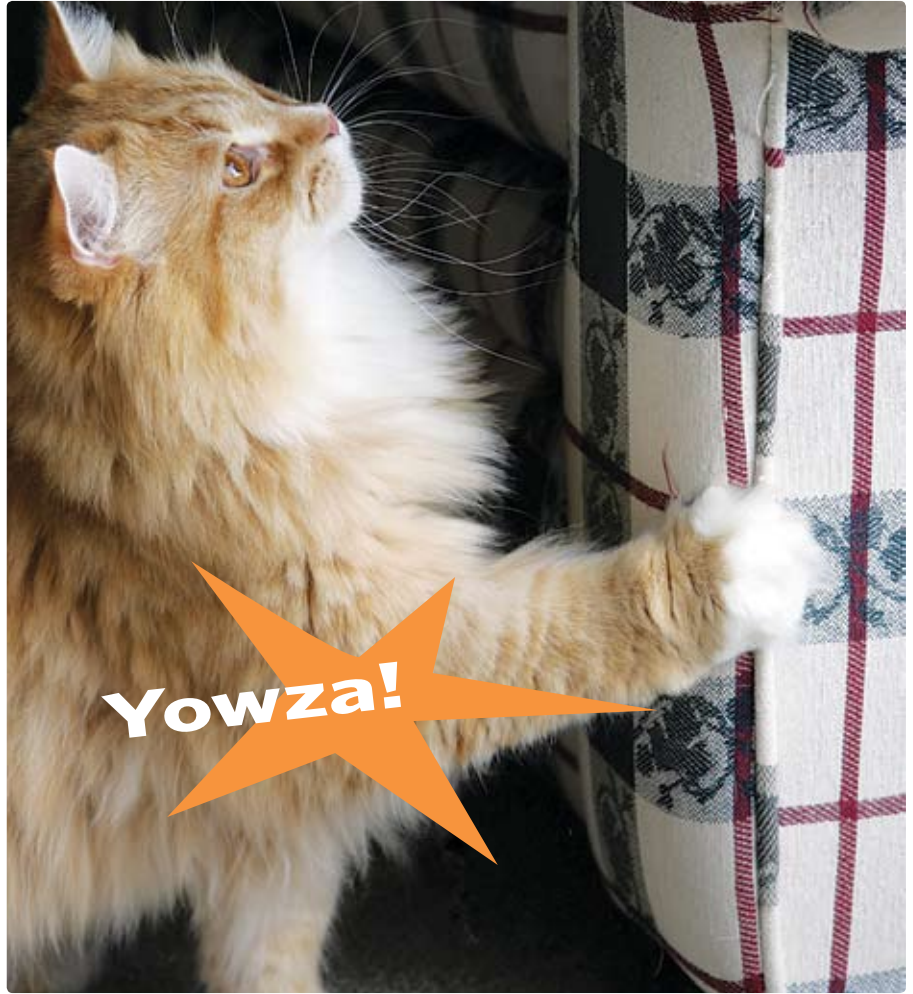
At the same time that cats have been winning the popularity contest, they've been continuing to turn up in animal shelters. While many shelters across the United States have seen a decrease in their canine intake and euthanasia numbers, many of the same organizations continue to be overwhelmed by cats—beautiful, healthy, “normal” cats who should be in loving homes.

At the Animal Rescue League (ARL) of Boston, the small, private humane orga-

nization where I work, we admitted more than 6,000 cats in 2006. That represented 61 percent of our intakes; only 20 percent were dogs, and the rest were small animals and wildlife. The news wasn't all bad for kitties, though: While we took in cats at a higher rate, we also sent more of them home with new adopters—in that same year, 71 percent of our adoptees were cats and only 17 percent were dogs.

In some ways, cats are victims of their own charms. We love them for their

But while we know that many cats are relinquished to shelters because of behavior problems, there is little information about behavior problems in cats *after* they're adopted from a shelter. While we could assume that cats exhibit similar problem behaviors once they're adopted, we might be wrong.



Neither their gender nor the way they had been housed within the shelter affected the problem behaviors cats displayed post-adoption. FIELDING PIEPEREIT/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

feistiness—as long as they don't show it by attacking our curtains. We love them for their independence—as long as they don't think outside the box (the litter box, that is). The qualities that draw people to cats may also lead to problem behaviors for those owners who expect their cats to be “easy keepers.” While many people tolerate the feline antics that don't severely intrude on their lifestyle, many others become frustrated by the furniture-scratching, litter box-avoiding, plant-attacking furball that is their new housemate.

Some adopters believe the only solution is to give up; these folks often relinquish their cats to shelters, abandon them, or have them euthanized. Two separate studies—Gary Patronek's “Risk factors for relinquishment of cats to an animal

shelter,” published in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* in 1996, and Mo Salman's “Behavioral reasons for relinquishment of dogs and cats to 12 shelters,” published in the *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science* in 2000—have shown that feline behavioral problems (especially house soiling) are among the most common reasons behind the relinquishment of cats.

But while we know that many cats are relinquished to shelters because of behavior problems, there is little information about behavior problems in cats *after* they're adopted from a shelter. While we could assume that cats exhibit similar problem behaviors once they're adopted, we might be wrong. And even if our assumption is correct, we don't know if the behaviors com-

mence immediately once the cat is in his new environment or if they take a while to show up. Do they eventually go away? How do owners feel about their cats' naughtiness, and what do owners do about it?

Without this information, it is impossible to effectively counsel adopters about what to expect from their new cat, how to understand and cope with his behaviors, how to prevent serious problems from developing, and where to get help if problems do arise. And if we can't provide that kind of support, how can we be sure that we're not just sending devilish kitties out to homes that will eventually give up on them? Educated counseling can give adopters a big leg up in their pursuit to form loving, long-lasting bonds with their cats.

TABLE 1

**Behaviors of all cats in survey (135 total)**

	Number of cats	Percentage (n/135)
Clawing furniture	102	76
Scratching/biting people	48	36
House-soiling	21	15
Inter-cat aggression	10	7

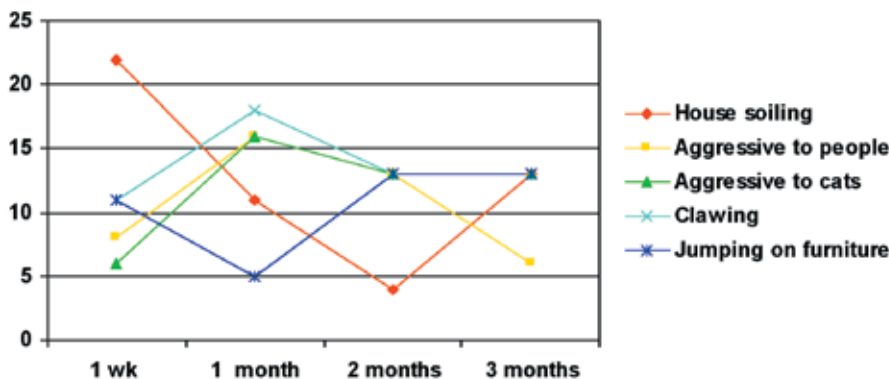
TABLE 2

**Behaviors considered “problematic” (experienced by 40 percent of owners; a total of 54 cats)**

	Number of cats	Percentage (n/54)
House-soiling	11	20
Clawing furniture	9	17
Scratching/biting people	9	17
Jumping on furniture	6	11
Inter-cat aggression	6	11

TABLE 3

**Incidence of behaviors at 1 week, 1 month, 2 months, and 3 months post-adoption**



**Survey Says ...**

With this in mind, in 2006, the staff, volunteers, and cat adopters at two shelters of the ARL participated in a study to learn the answers to these questions:

- Which post-adoption behaviors do owners consider problematic?
- How frequently do these behaviors happen?
- Does the frequency of these behaviors change over time?
- What do owners do to remedy the problems?
- Which behaviors are problematic enough that owners consider giving up the cat?
- Do the age and gender of the cat affect the incidence of the behaviors?
- Is a cat’s post-adoption behavior affected by how he was housed—that is, singly or in a colony-setting—within the shelter?

To get some answers, volunteers called the adopters of 135 cats one week post-adoption and again after one month, two months, and three months. They asked the same questions each time. Of the adopted cats, 53 were male and 82 were female. Their ages ranged from two months to 12 years, and they were all neutered before adoption. Eighty-one of the cats had been housed singly at ARL, and 54 had been housed in large colony enclosures. Ninety-three cats were adopted into single-cat homes and 42 into multi-cat homes.

While many of the adopters we surveyed reported that their cats scratched the furniture or displayed other typical feline behavior issues (see table 1 above), more than half of the respondents—60 percent—did not consider their cats’ behaviors problematic. But 40 percent believed some of their kitties’ behaviors were bothersome; the most common behaviors that bothered adopters were house-soiling, furniture-clawing, and scratching or biting (see table 2).

A pleasant surprise? Adopters reported that the incidence of both problematic house-soiling and aggression towards people decreased over time (see table 3). The gradual reduction suggests that cats, like dogs, go through an adjustment period in their new homes.

Of the adopters we talked to, only two percent had considered giving up their cats due to behavior problems; house-soiling and aggression toward people were the two issues these responders mentioned. When owners were asked if they would ever consider giving up their cats, 32 percent said they would never consider it, while 68 percent said they would under certain circumstances.

Furniture-clawing was the most commonly reported post-adoption behavior problem overall. Seventy-six percent of adopters reported that their new cats clawed the furniture, but only 7 percent considered the clawing a problem. We got similar results for the kitties who displayed aggression toward people: While some adopted cats did scratch or bite, many of the adopters who reported the behaviors didn't find them problematic. (Maybe we have been too critical of our cat clientele! While those surrendering cats to us often report their frustration over their pussycats' peccadilloes, many of our cat adopters seem to tolerate some pretty annoying behaviors.)

When adopters were asked what they had done to address a problem behavior,

TABLE 4

### Owners' attempted remedies for problem behaviors

	n	Percentage (n/54)
Did nothing	14	26
Changed environment	13	24
Called consultant	9	17
Sprayed water on cat	5	9
Reprimanded cat verbally	4	7
Gave cat attention	1	2
Hit cat	1	2

TABLE 5

### Reasons cited by owner for possible relinquishment of any cat

	n	Percentage (n/92)
House soiling	39	42
Aggression to people	28	30
Clawing furniture	13	14
Inter-cat aggression	9	10

their most common answer was "I did nothing." The runners-up: Adopters reported that they had either changed the cat's environment in some way or called a behavior consultant (see table 4 above). (People were more likely to seek the help of a consultant when the adopted cat had displayed aggression toward people; they were less likely to call in cases that involved house-soiling).

I was surprised to see that calling a behavior consultant was the third most common response by adopters seeking help. Previous studies have indicated that calling a behaviorist is often a last resort, and I suspect our study might have shown the same results if ARL didn't provide a free behavior helpline for adopters. Having this kind of post-adoption support available may be invaluable to

new pet owners struggling to deal with problem behaviors.

Of the adopters we talked to, only two percent had considered giving up their cats due to behavior problems; house-soiling and aggression toward people were the two issues these responders mentioned. When owners were asked if they would *ever* consider giving up their cats, 32 percent said they would never consider it, while 68 percent said they would under certain circumstances. The owners who said they might consider it listed the same reasons cited by those who already had: house-soiling and scratching or biting people (see table 5).

Surprisingly, neither gender nor the kind of housing within the shelter affected the frequency or type of cats' behavior problems after adoption. This may be because

we had a relatively small number of cats in our study; if we'd looked at a larger number of cats, we may have seen a difference.

**Correct Kitty Counseling**

So what did we learn from our survey, and how can we use this information to improve our feline adoption counseling?

- House-soiling was the most commonly reported problematic behavior issue post-adoption, and the most commonly cited reason for possible relinquishment. With this in mind, pre-adoption counseling should emphasize good litter box care. I like to call it COPE; the mnemonic can help adopters remember that litter boxes should be **clean** (scooped and supplemented with fresh litter twice daily), **open** (no hoods), **plentiful** (litter boxes equal to the number of cats) and **easy** for the cats to get to.
- Incidents of house-soiling tended to decrease as cats adjusted to their new homes. Adopters should be counseled about the adjustment period and reminded that the COPE litter box strategy may make for fewer stains on the carpet.
- Aggression toward people was the second most commonly cited reason for possible relinquishment. Playfully aggressive cats and cats who bite when petted or handled should be identified and, when placed, should go to tolerant adopters who know about their new kitties' issues. These owners should be taught how to play with their cats, how to pet them safely, and what toys may provide alternative stimulation. Adopters of aggressive kitties may also find that adding a second cat to the household decreases the first cat's aggressive behavior.
- Furniture-clawing was the second most commonly reported behavior problem. While some people are more tolerant of a clawed sofa than a clawed face, adopters should be counseled that this behavior is likely to occur, and that providing appropriate scratching posts to their new little tigers may help keep their sofas intact.



**Amy Marder** is the director of behavioral service at the **Animal Rescue League of Boston**, where she provides free consultations to adopters, oversees behavioral enrichment programs, and provides regular lectures and demonstrations to staff, volunteers, and the public. She graduated from the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine in 1979 and completed its first residency in veterinary behavior in 1985. She has served as the **ASPCA's vice president of behavioral medicine** and holds the position of clinical assistant professor at the **Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University**, and she is the author of *The Complete Dog Owner's Manual* and *Your Healthy Pet*.

- Finally, owners should be encouraged to come to us for help if they encounter a behavior problem. Many behavior problems can be satisfactorily treated, but outcomes are better if the problems are caught early. A behavior help line at the shelter can be an invaluable aid in helping adopters and preventing our feline friends from cycling back through the shelter system. **AS**



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