



Your Secret Feline Decoder Ring: Feline Behavior Assessments
Live Webcast Audience Questions and Answers
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1) Q: How can I assess a cat that continually bites, but is friendly?

A: The important thing is identifying the cat's triggers that cause him to bite. Then, ideally, design a behavior modification program to desensitize and counter condition the cat to these triggers. Once the behavior modification plan is implemented, follow-up with additional behavior assessments and feedback from staff and volunteers to determine if additional action is needed.

2) Q: When so many cats lose their homes due to litter box issues, what can be done in the shelter setting to mitigate those problems or stop them from developing in the first place?

A: Most litter box issues can be prevented through education, education, and education! This means educating the community and adopters about standard litter box recommendations (e.g., scooping the litter box at least daily, providing one litter box for every level of the house, placing the litter boxes in private accessible locations, providing one more litter box than the number of cats in the household, etc.). Any cat who is eliminating outside of the litter box must be examined by a veterinarian to rule out possible medical issues that may be contributing to, or are the actual cause of, the problem.

3) Q: I thought there was evidence that feral cats form loose matriarchies where the oldest female cat is the alpha cat.

A: Scientists studying the social behavior of cats have found that domestic cats, like lions, are definitely social cats with established cat social structures including complex matriarchal hierarchies similar to lion prides. In feral colonies, observers have noted that related females in colonies are sometimes bonded so closely that they will den together when birthing, act as midwives for each other, and nurse each other's kittens, with kittens being raised cooperatively by all of the females. I do not believe that the studies show that the oldest female cat is necessarily the "alpha" cat.

4) Q: Why will a cat who appears to be enjoying being petted suddenly turn and bite?

A: A cat who does this is probably eliciting "status-related aggression." Cats do not have social systems that are identical to those of dogs or humans, but they still have a system wherein some individuals have higher rank or lower rank than others. Usually any conflicts about controlling status occur only with other cats. Occasionally some cats manipulate people in a manner similar to that of dominantly (or control-related) aggressive dogs. This has been termed *status-related aggression*.

Many of these cats actively solicit attention by jumping into a caregiver's lap and then biting the caregiver if they are petted in a way that the cat does not like, shifted, or petted at all. Cats with very exaggerated status-related aggression may lie on their people, batting at them to make them settle in positions that the cat controls and then biting the people if they do not do this or if they move. The key is the cat is trying to *control* the interaction.

5) **Q: Do you monitor your shelter cat's behavior while it is at the shelter, from when it arrives until it is adopted?**

A: Yes, by using the initial behavior assessment, day-to-day observations and experiences of staff and volunteers, and behavior rounds (“mini-assessments”).

6) **Q: What is your opinion on clicker training cats in the shelter environment? Do you use any clicker training to get cats “out of their shell?”**

A: Although clicker training is not used for the cats in the animal shelter that I work with, I feel that it could be a useful tool. To learn more about clicker training for cats, go to Clickertraining.com.

7) **Q: After a cat arrives at the shelter, how long should you wait before you behavior test the cat? What age is best to conduct behavior assessments with cats?**

A: Because animals undergo stress when they are first acclimating to a shelter environment and stress influences behavior, it is recommended that the initial behavior assessment be done at or after the cat has been at the shelter for three days. Research done by the ASPCA indicates cat behavior changes over the first 72 hours after arrival to the shelter and this alters the ability to accurately predict socialization.

Behavior assessments should be done on all cats who are old enough to be adopted.

8) **Q: What physical or emotional problems would make a cat chase her tail?**

A: If the problem is chronic and persistent, I would be concerned that there is an underlying medical issue. This could be related to a neurologic problem or trauma that is causing pain, discomfort, or irritation. If this is the case, the cat should be seen by a veterinarian.

Cats, particularly younger cats and kittens, will often chase their tails in play. This behavior is triggered by the same motivation when an excited cat sees an object like a strip of paper or cotton ball on the floor. This compels the cat to arch his back, stand up on his hindquarters to try to appear taller or even raise his hair on his back. The whole reaction comes from cats’ natural predator instinct.

9) **Q: Since I have been in the veterinary field, I have found cats to be treated as second class citizens. This attitude seems to be pervasive among pet owners and veterinary professions. How do you get past this?**

A: Yes, this is a long-standing and difficult problem. But as cats become the more popular pet, veterinary clinics servicing just cats are increasing and resources geared toward the special needs of the cat are multiplying, I feel that this attitude is changing. As an individual veterinary professional, we can share our esteem for cats with our clients, colleagues, and the public.

10) Q: Why do some cats eat moist food from small bowls by scooping it out with their paw to bring it to their mouth?

A: Cat's paws are sensory organs with which the cat can manipulate his or her world, as vital to the cat as hands are to a human. In addition, cats have scent glands located in the pads of their feet near the base of their claws. For these reasons, some cats chose to maneuver their food with their paws instead of eating it directly with their mouth.

11) Q: Do you think behavior assessments need to be modified to account for behavioral changes seen in declawed cats?

A: No. The only exception to this would be a cat who is exhibiting a medical condition related to the declaw procedure.

12) Q: Would you be able to give an example of a behavior modification plan for a fearful cat?

A: The answer to this question is complex but it should include:

- Early recognition of the fearful response because permitting the animal to continually or repeatedly become fearful only reinforces the behavior.
- Avoidance of situations that induce the fear.
- Gradual desensitization and counterconditioning of the cat to the stimuli that have made him or her fearful.
- Rewarding the cat any time that he or she does not act fearful.
- In some cases, the use of antianxiety medication may be helpful as an *adjunct* to behavior modification therapy.

13) Q: Our shelter is very small and was built in 1962, getting away from the dog noise is impossible. What recommendations do you have for shelters like ours to carry out assessments?

A: In these situations you will have to be creative. I would recommend using an office or a bathroom located in the shelter to perform the assessment – any place within the shelter that has less noise.

14) Q: How does the point system work?

A: It assigns positive and negative points for certain behaviors exhibited during the assessment. These points are then added together to determine the category that the cat fits in, or type of behavior modification program required. An example of this are the personality characteristics used in the [ASPCA's Feline-ality™ 101](#).

15) Q: Is there an assessment tool out there that you would recommend?

A: Although the needs of every shelter are different, I feel a good place to start is the Feline-ality™ program from the ASPCA. For more detailed information click on the link in question 15, above.

16) Q: I work in a vet office and have found that some cats have a bad reaction to gloves. Have you found that to be a case with shelter cats?

A: Yes, this can be true in both environments. I personally have found using a towel to cover the cat, especially the head, provides him or her with visual security and is helpful when having to use gloves.

17) Q: When using leather gloves have you noticed cats reacting aggressively to the scent of other cats on the glove? Do you apply Feliway on the glove first?

A: My personal experience is that the cat is reacting more to the restraint than the smell of other cats (although the cat could also be reacting to the smell of other cats – this would make an interesting study). Feliway Spray could be applied to the gloves prior to handling the cat. I would recommend waiting at least 5 minutes (possibly more) after application, allowing the spray to dry because Feliway Spray is not supposed to be applied directly on the cat.

18) Q: How do you assess which cats should stay in a cage as opposed to a communal adoption room and how much time does that take?

A: This is difficult to do from the initial behavior assessment alone. In the shelter that I work with, we place a new inductee to the communal room in a cage located in the communal room for a few days. Reports received from staff and volunteers on the inductee's behavior during this time determine whether or not we allow the cat to be free in the communal room.

19) Q: As a foster based organization, is there a way to do the assessment in the home of the cat we would be taking into our program?

A: Sure. If the person who is surrendering the cat is willing, I would recommend using a room in the home for which the cat is unfamiliar or does not spend a lot of time in, with minimal distractions, to perform the assessment. This would be a way of trying to recreate a “novel” room.

20) Q: Do you send any cats back to their original feral colony or outdoor caretaker if they are not considered suitable for adoption through your shelter program? Do you transfer to behaviorally astute foster homes?

A: Cats who come into the Dane County Friends of Ferals program are either strays or surrendered by people who cannot or will not continue to care for them. For this reason, they are not returned to their original colony (although, returning to the original colony is always the best choice, if at all possible). If the cat shows signs that he or she does not welcome human attention

(i.e., feral), they are adopted into an outdoor home with a responsible caregiver. For those cats who show signs of welcoming human attention (i.e., tame), they are adopted into an indoor home with a responsible caregiver. For the latter, this sometimes involves a behaviorally astute foster home.

21) Q: If a cat growls but does not attack, is it really aggressive or just scared?

A: Growling is considered a sign of aggression. It can happen because the cat feels threatened or scared.

22) Q: Approximately how long does it take to do the assessment that you described in your presentation?

A: Although this varies by the individual performing the assessment and their level of experience, the assessment usually takes 15-20 minutes.

23) Q: Should you assess an adult mom after 3 days even if they are with a litter of kittens?

A: It is possible, but one must consider that the mother cat could show signs of maternal aggression.

24) Q: Do you have a separate group of staff or volunteers assigned to work with more behaviorally challenged cats?

A: Yes, we use volunteers. It is important for the individuals who are performing behavior modification programs to be trained in this area and to be able to recognize feline body language.

25) Q: How to best differentiate between ferals and domestics in a shelter environment, particularly after a traumatic event or natural disaster?

A: This is always a challenge. A place to start would be a behavior assessment similar to the one that is used by the Dane County Friends of Ferals, which is one of the webcast resources available [here](#). Look for item #1b-d: Feral or Fearful.

26) Q: Using the Meet Your Match test, how do you deal with cats that are between the different categories?

A: Using the Meet Your Match Feline-ality™ program involves calculating a total valiance score and a total independent-gregarious score. The intersection of these two scores on the valiant/independent-gregarious scale provides the personality category. If you feel that the cat is truly between two categories, you could describe the cat as a combination of the two. For example, “Gabe is a Leader of the Band with an emerging Party Animal.”

27) Q: Can you talk more about the advantages of testing temperament only vs. testing personality - if they are both done on an ongoing basis or done only once, then what's the advantage of one over the other?

A: There are essentially three goals for behavior assessments: (1) identify needs of the individual cat; (2) input for shelter pathway planning; and (3) match the pet with best possible home (which is the ultimate goal). Ideally, the initial behavior assessment and subsequent “mini-assessments” should provide information to meet all three goals. I believe that the difficulties most animal rescue organizations have is implementing a systematic way of applying the information that is gathered.

28) Q: Do cats display calming signals like dogs?

A: In general, the term calming signals has been used to describe the social skills displayed by animals to avoid conflict. These conflict behaviors indicate uneasiness and are used to diffuse or resolve conflict.

Although much has been written about calming signals in dogs and not as much in cats, I do believe cats display calming signals, as well. An article that touches on calming signals in cats that you may be interested in was published by the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA), entitled [*Feline Development, Social Behavior and Communication*](#).

29) Q: Do you find that sickness in cats affects their behavior? E.g., would an upper respiratory infection make them more or less likely to act irritable?

A: Absolutely! This is why it is important to rule out medical issues that may be contributing factors to, and sometimes the cause of, behavior problems.

I am reminded of my own demeanor last week when I had the stomach flu. I think my family would have described me as a little irritable.

30) Q: Where is Dane County? Are there hands-on workshops there?

A: Dane County is in south central Wisconsin. The county seat is Madison, which is also the capital of the state. As far as I know, there are no hands-on workshops in Dane County. But, it is a great idea!

31) Q: Is there such thing as a cat who is just crabby and temperamental? What is the best way to deal with those cats in a shelter environment, and when trying to place them?

A: Yes, there are cats who can be described as “crabby and temperamental.” Probably a more precise description would be cats who are reactive – to certain actions, objects, and/or gestures. For these cats, it is important to identify the cat’s triggers that cause him to react. Then, ideally, design a behavior modification program to desensitize and counter condition the cat to these triggers.

32) Q: How far away from the cat's cage is the assessment room that is used in the assessment described in your presentation?

A: It depends on where the cat is located in the shelter. In the shelter that I work with, if the cat comes from the “Intake Room,” the distance is approximately 8 feet, the “Well Room,” approximately 30 feet, the “Medical Room,” approximately 15 feet. It is a small facility with several separate rooms.

33) Q: How should behavior during cage cleaning be integrated into the overall behavior assessment?

A: The behavior should be noted in the cat’s record (preferably a separate behavior record). Then this information is incorporated into the overall behavior assessment of the cat, along with other information (i.e., initial behavior assessment, staff and volunteer observations, and behavioral rounds).

34) Q: Do you counsel adopters on overstimulation, issues that provoke aggression, and the time it takes to develop a stable relationship?

A: Yes, all of these topics are helpful to review with adopters, especially if the adoptive cat is displaying an issue in this area. Unfortunately, time often prevents us from getting as detailed as we would like.

35) Q: Do you ever use behavior modification medications? Prozac, etc.

A: Yes, as an *adjunct* to behavioral therapy, not a replacement for it. There are many conditions that really benefit from the use of antianxiety medication, when used properly.

36) Q: Do you do the full assessment more than once before outcome decision?

A: Sometimes, it depends on the case. For example, if the initial behavior assessment indicated that the cat would be best suited for an outdoor home with a responsible caregiver (i.e., feral) and reports from volunteers now indicate that the cat is welcoming attention from humans, we would reassess the best placement for the cat.

37) Q: What is the process to rehome a feral cat to a new location?

A: Probably the most important factor is to confine the cat for a period of at least 3-4 weeks. Details on this process are provided by [Alley Cat Allies](#).

38) Q: If a cat is surrendered because of litter box problems, how do you assess if the cat can be re-trained?

A: This can be difficult because often times the same problem is not exhibited in a shelter environment (i.e., the cat uses the litter box in the shelter). Therefore, what I believe is the most important thing to do for *all* people who are adopting cats is to review the guidelines for litter box use.

39) Q: How do you decide if a feral cat should be spayed/neutered and returned to a colony or euthanized for public safety and population control?

A: Whenever possible, feral or free-roaming cats should be sterilized, ear-tipped for identification as being sterilized, vaccinated for distemper (i.e., FVRCP) and rabies and *returned* to their original location. There has been much written about Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) and its benefits for the cats, animal shelters, and the community. Dr. Julie Levy does a wonderful job of reviewing this information in the webcast that she did for Maddie's Institute entitled [Shelter Crowd Control: Keeping Community Cats Out of Shelters.](#)

40) Q: What is useful to me as an adoption coordinator is to distill a behavior assessment into a few sentences of description which is put on the cat's profile and that description may evolve as the cat's behavior changes. How do we best facilitate this?

A: I agree! Using creative terms like the ones developed by the Meet Your Match Feline-ality™ program are helpful in providing potential adopters with an idea of the types of cats that are available. As far as changing the description if the cat's behavior changes, this should be done through a review of staff and volunteer observations and results of the behavioral rounds on a regular basis.

41) Q: We are a foster-based rescue that pulls from high-capacity shelters. Can you recommend any assessments that can be done at the shelter to determine whether the cats we are pulling are relatively social and friendly cats?

A: As I pointed out in the webcast, the initial behavior assessment is just one snapshot in time and needs to be combined with staff and volunteer observations and results of the behavioral rounds. Combining this information should be helpful in determining social and friendly cats, but is not a guarantee.

42) Q: Do shelters base enrichment programs on assessments?

A: Enrichment programs are for *all* animals, regardless of the results of the behavior assessments. They are designed to provide shelter residents with experiences to improve physical and psychological health. This can also increase desirable behaviors through choices and variety in the animals' environments.