



American Association of  
FELINE PRACTITIONERS®

# BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MULTIPLE-CAT HOUSEHOLDS

Behavior modification can help cats learn more relaxed and desirable behaviors. Once behavior modification is implemented, as described below, it can help reduce intercat tension by redirecting cats, and rewarding more appropriate and relaxed behaviors between cats.

## RECOMMENDATION 1

### PROVIDE A SELECTION OF SPECIAL ITEMS THAT YOUR CAT FINDS REWARDING.

Every cat has their own preference. Caregivers should offer each cat a variety of special items and watch which ones the cat shows interest in or plays with the most. Mix different types of rewards to keep your cat interested.

REWARD	SUGGESTIONS	NOTES
Favored Food	Liquid/Tube Treats	Lickable treats (e.g., Churu®).
	Cat Treats	Hard or soft cat treats, or small amount of canned cat food.
	Other Foods	Small amount of canned cat food or other special treat (e.g., baby food or tuna juice with no spices or onions).
Social Interaction	Verbal Praise	Examples include “Good job!” or “Good kitty!” Remember to be excited and happy as you praise the cat. If your cat is sensitive to sound, praise them quietly.
	Petting or Brushing	Some cats prefer physical contact. The preferred location for petting/brushing depends on the cat, but most cats enjoy being petted on their chin, cheeks, and between the eyes and ears.
	Playing	Pick toys that are the same size and texture as the natural prey of cats. Wand toys and feather toys are popular for human-cat play. Be patient as you play. Cats might watch the toy for a while before they try to catch it, and older cats might just like to watch the toy move.
Toys	Movement Toys	In a preference assessment, cats preferred playing with toys that move on their own rather than stationary or static toys. Choose toys that move in response to the cat’s actions (e.g., ball tunnel toys) or move by themselves (e.g., Hex Bug®).
Investigatory	Opportunity for Observation	Some cats enjoy watching their surroundings, especially from an elevated location.
	Opportunity for Exploration	Some cats enjoy exploring new objects and locations, especially through sniffing.

## RECOMMENDATION 2

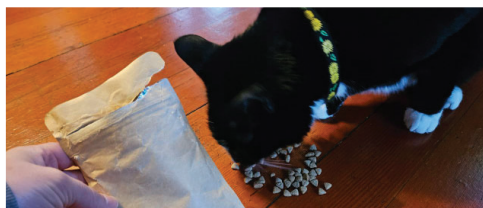
### PROVIDE EACH CAT A SAFE SPACE.

Each cat should have a safe space separate from the other cat(s) and should be allowed to individually explore the home.



**Allow cats the opportunity to explore the home on their own.**

Allowing each cat to explore the home at different times reduces the likelihood of intercat tension from occurring, and provides a more pleasant experience for each cat as they explore the space.



**Give rewards in a cat’s favored room.**

By providing rewards in a cat’s favored room, caregivers can help cats to associate these locations with pleasant experiences. Soon the cat will learn to predict that good things happen in these locations. In each cat’s favored room, caregivers should include safe spaces which allow for hiding (e.g., high-sided cat beds, boxes, cat cubes, tunnels), elevated options (e.g., perches, cat trees), and enrichment (e.g., feeding puzzles, toys) so that cats have choices within this location.

## RECOMMENDATION 3

### TEACH CATS NEW BEHAVIORS AND TO UTILIZE ENVIRONMENTAL MODIFICATIONS.

Cats can learn new behaviors to reduce intercat tension. If one cat blocks the escape of another cat, the caregiver can ask that cat to target (touch/follow) an object and guide them to their safe space. This teaches the cat what TO do, rather than only what NOT to do. You can teach a cat to target in three steps.



#### 1. Place a target stick directly in front of the cat's face.

The moment the cat touches the stick with their nose, the caregiver can give the cat their preferred reward(s). To make learning more appealing, placing soft or lickable treats on the end of the stick can entice the cat. By doing this the cat also receives an immediate reward.



#### 2. Slowly move the target stick further from the cat's face.

Caregivers should gradually increase the distance between the stick and the cat's face. This allows the behavior training to be conducted slowly, giving the cat more opportunity to learn and adapt.



#### 3. Move the stick so the cat must reach to touch it.

As the cat learns, the caregiver can ask the cat to move further to touch the stick. Eventually, the cat will learn that approaching and touching the stick leads to something good. The stick can then be used to guide the cat's behavior to something positive (i.e., move away from another cat).

**Ask to "Go to a Place."** Target sticks aren't always available. A verbal phrase such as "go to a place" can be useful to ask a cat to go to an assigned location (e.g., cat tree or safe space). To teach a verbal cue:

- Show the cat that approaching the special location leads to rewards.
- Encourage the cat to go to the location several times throughout the day, rewarding each time.
- Once the cat is readily going to the location, introduce the verbal phrase "go to a place." At first, say it the moment the cat goes to the location. Repeat this process several times.
- Continue as before, but begin to say the verbal phrase just before the cat goes to the location. Repeat this process several times.
- Soon, the cat will understand that the phrase means go to that place. The cat can now be asked to "go to a place," if needed.



Cats can be taught to go to safe spaces such as high-sided cat beds, perches, or tunnels. Caregivers can give their cat a reward for using these spaces and see if it alters the cat's behavior. If not, try a new reward.

## RECOMMENDATION 4

### ANY ATTEMPT TO MODIFY CAT BEHAVIOR SHOULD BE DONE SLOWLY.



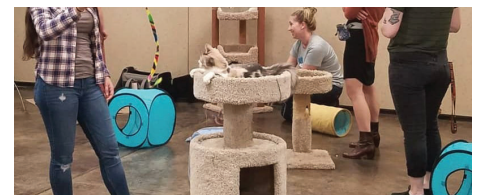
#### Over the course of introduction sessions, slowly increase the time cats spend together.

Introduce cats to each other gradually, allowing them to slowly get used to one another. Taking small steps helps prevent tension and encourages positive interactions.



#### As sessions progress, slowly decrease the distance between the cats.

These introductions should be spread over several sessions, not just one session or day. Watch cats' body language for signs of stress (e.g., dilated pupils, flattened ears, frequent lip-licking, rigid/stiff body posture), and stop if they occur.



#### Slowly expose the cat to experiences.

A cat can associate an area or room of the home with a previous unpleasant experience if intercat tension has occurred. Re-expose the cat to that area slowly by rewarding the cat at nearby locations, gradually moving toward and then finally into the area/room.

**Step-by-step instructions on how to introduce a new cat into the home can be found at [catfriendly.com/tension](https://catfriendly.com/tension).**

This handout accompanies the 2024 AAEP Intercat Tension Guidelines: Recognition, Prevention and Management, which can be accessed at [catvets.com/tension](https://catvets.com/tension) and are published in the *Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery* ([go.jfms.com/Intercat\\_tension\\_GLs\\_2024](https://go.jfms.com/Intercat_tension_GLs_2024)).