

Litter Box Problems – A Case Study

As the owner of sixteen different cats and other animals over the last 30 years, I thought I was pretty well educated on managing various problems that arise when caring for pets. My current cat, Meeko, however has provided some interesting challenges related to his litter box that I thought I would never solve. Meeko was obtained from the Washington Area Humane Society at about 6 months of age for my daughter. Because we had just moved into a new house, for the first time ever I had this cat de-clawed to protect my furniture and children from being scratched. Meeko adjusted well to his new home and was litter trained already, so I thought we were fine. Over the ensuing years, Meeko began to urinate on occasion in places away from his litter box, which was located in the finished basement of our house. Initially this was just a rare event and I assumed he wasn't feeling well or ate something that disagreed with him because he was still using his box. However, he began to regularly use the carpeted floor at the bottom of the basement steps to urinate to the point that our whole house began to wreak of urine. The vet checked out Meeko at various times and nothing seemed to be wrong. We changed the litter more often but found him using the box less and less. We tried changing the brand of litter several times. An experienced friend watched Meeko while we were on vacation, and she commented that we had too much litter in the pan and we began to fill it more shallowly to no avail. We resigned ourselves to the problem after a period of time and I became a slave to regular neutralizing, deodorizing, and shampooing the carpet since it was just that one spot. Because his favorite spot to urinate was located right in front of the entry from the garage, there was no possibility of moving the box there. We thought because he was somewhat shy when there was a lot of commotion in the house with the kids and their friends, we would buy a cover for the box to give Meeko privacy. No luck with this attempt so the cover was removed.

Eventually we got a dog when Meeko was 5-6 years old, and then adopted another dog about a year later. The pets got along fine, but Meeko's problem persisted. Now the dogs began rummaging through the litter box for his leavings, which became fewer and fewer. By this time the basement in spite of my regular attention smelled so badly we couldn't take it any more and we ripped out all of the carpeting in the basement and had the place tiled over. The urinating in the basement did stop, but he began to go on the throw rug at the entry to our house and in the living room and my daughter's bedroom near her closet. So I began regularly washing the rugs like I had always done and was able to keep up. I thought the dogs were making the cat nervous, so I moved the litter box to the location in the dining room where he had been choosing to relieve himself to give him more privacy and change his routine. He simply continued to urinate and now defecate beside the box! At other times that we left on vacation and had the dogs with us or in the kennel, our cat's sitters reported that the cat's pattern didn't change while we were out of the house.

One day I made a comment about my problem cat to my friend who loaned me a pamphlet called "The Fastidious Feline" written by Patricia McConnell that she had found very useful. In this pamphlet was a very concise review of various litter box problems and possible solutions from the cat's point of view and based on behavioral research. At first I was frustrated because a lot of the advice, like moving the location of the box to the problem area, changing the litter (which we had done many times), making the litter shallow, ruling out medical issues or territorial marking (this didn't apply to Meeko), neutralizing, not just covering the odors with scents humans tolerate better, were things I had already tried. Sometimes the answer is so simple it becomes elusive. One point that was made in the pamphlet was that cats, like humans, sometimes don't want to walk "all the way downstairs" to go to the bathroom, and that they don't like to have their paws irritated by gravely litter or messed by their own excrement (hence the shallow litter so they can feel where not to tread).

Using her advice, I went to the local grocery store and bought two additional pans for each of my other floors, and bought a sandy, clumping litter. Although I had probably used every major brand of litter, I always bought the gravel type with or without deodorizers. I filled the boxes with a few inches of the new litter and placed them in the original location in the basement, the dining room location that Meeko regularly used after freshly neutralizing the area, and the third in my daughter's bedroom. Immediately the cat began to use all three litter boxes and never went anywhere else again! Now I find that I have to clean all three boxes twice a day to keep up with the amount that he goes. I can't believe all of that was regularly on my carpet!

I think in Meeko's case, what made him different from my other fifteen cats was the de-clawing and how it affected his paws sensitivity, making the rough large gravelly litter uncomfortable for him. It was amazing that something so simple could fix a problem that had been going on for 9 years!

Fixing this problem has greatly improved our enjoyment of Meeko and my family and houseguests appreciate it too. I learned that with pets there is always a solution if you keep your eyes and ears open and look at things from their perspective in addition to the human one.