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THE FELINE BEHAVIOR SERIES

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Discouraging Litter Box Misbehavior

At the same time you're making your cat's litter box more inviting, you should be gently suggesting that he shouldn't revisit the sites he used instead of the box. The trick to keeping your cat away from inappropriate elimination spots is to make those areas smell unappealing and even revolting. How do you do that? Through the use of smell, touch, and even some basic cat knowledge.

The first step is to thoroughly clean the area where the accident occurred, using an enzymatic cleaner designed for use on pet messes. Any lingering odor invites reuse. After the area is clean, try some of the following methods to discourage reuse or to change the way your cat uses the area:

- Put food bowls on the spot. Cats don't like to relieve themselves where they eat. You can gradually move the bowls to another location when your cat is using the litter box reliably again.
- Put a deterrent on the area. You can cover the area with material that a cat doesn't like to set foot on, such as double-sided tape, aluminum, foil, mats that give off a slight static shock when stepped on - are another option. Also try to spray the area with a scent that cats hate, such as citrus. If your cat uses houseplants for litter boxes, cover the top of the soil with sharp rocks or small pine cones.
- Put a litter box on the spot. This is the "if you can't beat them, join them" technique. After your cat is using the litter box, you can gradually change its location.

One form of discouragement we don't recommend is physical punishment. For one thing, it doesn't work. For another, punishing the cat who's already avoiding the litter box because he's stressed out won't do anything to make him more relaxed. The old nose-in-it-and-swat method of training isn't even recommended for dogs anymore. Don't use anything like it on your cat.

Don't forget the value of praise! If you see your cat using the litter box, reward him with a tasty treat.

