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MYTHS ABOUT YOUR FELINE FRIEND

Cats may be admired for their independence and mystique, but beware! Failing to understand your cat, and subscribing to some popular beliefs, may lead to behavioural problems and be detrimental to your cat's welfare. Here are a few misconceptions about cats:

- *“Cats are small clean dogs but better because they don't need toilet training or other training, they just need a warm bed, food and litter tray.”*

Wrong! Cats are highly trainable (otherwise they wouldn't come running whenever they hear the fridge door open) and benefit from training.

What they learn in their first 3 months is likely to influence what it does for the rest of its life. If taught to chase human hands, allowed to scratch

furniture, then these behaviours will persist. If taught that frequent stroking and picking up and touching all over is what you want your cat to tolerate, then it is much more likely to take to this if it receives it regularly and gently from day 1. Training is the only way to teach your cat what you would like it to do. Reward it for any behaviour you like (such as using the scratching pole) with bits of roast chicken. Punishment is much less effective and will make the cat mistrust you. (1).



- *“Cats are utterly self-sufficient and can amuse themselves if left alone all day.” **Wrong!*** Solitary cats get bored. Being alone all day, and then expected to engage in intensive interaction with you after your return is the opposite to the normal pattern of interactions between cats. This can cause distress to our cats as it is restricting their natural cat behaviour. An unhappy cat may scratch for attention, show aggression to people or other animals, display destructive behaviour, develop anxiety which may appear as a depressed cat that sleeps erratically, has an altered appetite, grooms continuously (or neglects to groom) and may spray in its territory. As you can imagine, this cat is at high risk now of



relinquishment or euthanasia. Mental stimulation has many benefits: it enriches the cat, teaches the owner about their cat's personality and leads to increased attachment. All cats will benefit from food-finding games, a minimum of 2 regular play sessions a day with you (dawn and dusk is best), and petting and grooming. Remember also that a cat's natural defence strategy is flight, so any restrictive handling should be kept to a minimum. Vocal communication is just as effective in

enhancing your relationship with your cat. If another animal is introduced as company, remember that cats need their own little territory, in which they have all their requirements (food, litter, bed, a view) met. (2)

- “Cats are anti-social.” Wrong! Cats have excellent inter-cat communication, which is the evolutionary result of sharing territories. Homeless female cats will form colonies if food supply is adequate, and solitary males regularly cross into other territories. Cats will readily form bonds with their own species and with others (even rats and birds- their “prey”!), providing they are exposed to them at a young age.



- “My cat should have a litter before she is desexed so she’ll be a calmer pet.” A Petnet survey of pet owners found that 1/5th of owners believed this, but it is wrong! There is no proof that having a litter brings any behavioural advantages to the cat. Mating exposes the cat to risk of injury and viral infection from the tom, increases the likelihood of wandering and hence road injury or dog attacks, and creates unnecessary litters of kittens. A survey of Victorian shelters found that the main reason for people to relinquish cats to the shelter was because they had too many cats.

- “A cat without a tag in the neighbourhood probably has a home and is being looked after.” Wrong! A healthy stray cat in your neighbourhood may not necessarily belong to someone. In fact, many cats that enter shelters (80% of cats entering Victorian shelters) are semi-owned (they are fed and socialised by people, but not taken responsibility for), so are usually not desexed and extremely fertile. Similarly, if your cat goes missing, don’t presume it is being independent and will turn up in its own time. Community signage is the best means of advertising your lost pet. Placing a collar on your cat with a tag showing your cats name and phone number is not uncomfortable for the cat, and is less likely to cause injury than letting your cat roam anonymously around the neighbourhood. Microchips are an essential security back-up if you want the best chance for your cat to be reunited with you, and are now compulsory.

- “Dogs and cats can’t get along.” Wrong! A US study of 170 dog and cat households found that 2/3 of the homes described the dog/cat relationship as friendly. Interestingly, if the dog is adopted after the cat, the chances of a friendly relationship are much greater (75% versus 59% if the dog comes first). Acquiring a dog less than 12 months of age, of calm temperament, which has lived previously with cats also improves the odds of harmonious living.(3)



- *“I’m having a baby; the cat will have to go!”* Wrong! The survey mentioned above of Victorian shelters, revealed that the second main reason for cats to be relinquished was the arrival of a child, yet here is no need for the cat to go. Children and pets can co-exist and develop strong relationships and many benefits from this.
The website: <http://www.dpi.vic.gov.au/pets/environment-and-community/we-are-family> has excellent advice.
- *“My cat attacks me because it hates me”.* Wrong! Although there are many reasons why a cat may behave aggressively towards its owner, often it is because they’ve been encouraged to play in this way from an early age- to hunt and chase human flesh! It might be thinking you’re the best toy available! Play aggression should always be redirected towards toys. Any novel aggressive behaviour from your cat warrants a visit to the vet to rule out medical problems, and behavioural advice on how best to manage the situation safely.



- 1. Kim Kendall (Everything you wanted to know about your cat but were afraid to ask).
- 2. Proceedings of the Southern European Veterinary Conference & Congreso Nacional AVEPA, 2009 - Barcelona, Spain
- 3. (Feuerstein and Terkel '08; interactions of dogs and cats living under same roof. Appl animal behaviour Sc: 113;150-165)