



PREVENT A GREAT ESCAPE

by Pam Johnson-Bennett, *Cat Fancy*, December 2002

Keep your cat safe indoors and avert escape-artist behavior

For some indoor cats, the world beyond the window offers countless temptations. Every time the door opens, a variety of fascinating smells, sights and sounds entice your cat to explore. Your cat sees a wonderful world outside, not understanding the many dangers out there.

Unless you provide outlets for your cat's natural prey instinct and train your cat to stay away from the door, you could set yourself up for an endless game between the two of you—a game with a potentially dangerous outcome. The following techniques can help you reduce the chance of your cat performing a disappearing act.

Establish a greeting zone

One way to unintentionally set yourself up for failure is to greet or say good-bye to your cat right at the door. Many people reach down and greet their cats as they walk in, but this establishes a bad pattern.

Look around the room and find a spot to serve as your official hello and goodbye area. For example, provide a cat tree by the window so the area becomes a truly special spot that belongs only to your cat.

Whenever you enter the front door, walk over to the designated greeting area. Do not pet your cat at the front door at all—head straight to the greeting spot, calling your cat's name as you go. Do the same when you leave the house: walk over to the spot and say your goodbye there.

Help your cat associate this spot with good things by periodically leaving treats. When I trained my cats to come to our greeting area, I placed a tiny treat there when saying goodbye. This way, my cats focused on munching away as I left. Periodically, I hide a couple of treats on various perches for them to find during the day as an added bonus. My cats know all the good stuff happens at the greeting area, never at the door. You can also use a toy for this process. Rotate your cat's toys so you're introducing a "new" one when you leave the house.

With consistency, your cat will associate that particular area as the place to wait when your key turns in the lock. All household members should show consistency when it comes to ignoring your cat at the door and going over to the official greeting area.

Practice Deterrence

With cats determined to bolt out the door, you need to do more than set up an official greeting area. In this case, incorporate a deterrent into your behavior modification plan.



The easiest deterrent is a water-filled spray bottle. Keep the bottle right outside the front door to use only when you enter the home. Proceed as follows:

1. Bend down to your cat's level with the spray bottle ready as you open the door just a crack.
2. When your cat appears at the front door, give a squirt. You don't want your cat to associate you with this dastardly deed, so be quick and sneaky.
3. As soon as you squirt your cat, close the door and wait a few seconds before opening the door a crack again.
4. Be ready to squirt a second time if necessary.
5. If your cat isn't near the front door, go in and immediately head to your greeting spot. Act as if you know nothing about the spray of water your cat just received so your cat will connect the unpleasant water experience with the door itself and never with you.

Liven Up the Indoors

An extremely important but often overlooked aspect of this behavior modification plan involves improving the appeal of your cat's indoor environment. If the indoor life you created for your cat seems boring and stale from a predator's point of view, add some spice.

Start with the basic aesthetics of the environment:

- ❖ **A multi-perch cat tree.** Nearly a necessity for a happy indoor life, a cat tree serves as an ideal greeting area and provides your cat with something to climb. Perches are perfect for bird watching and allow more than one cat to enjoy the tree simultaneously. Cat trees also double as scratching posts. Cat trees give cats the security of elevation so they can survey their domain. Many cats naturally head for the tree when the doorbell rings because they know this is their own little sanctuary.
- ❖ **Hiding places.** Create a more appealing indoor environment with hiding places for your cat to tuck in for a nap or wait for prey to appear. Easily provide a cozy little hideaway by keeping a cloth on the dining room table if your cat likes to curl up on one of the chairs. Your cat might prefer to hide behind the pillows on the bed or couch. To avoid the cat hair left behind, place a decorative throw over the couch for easy laundering. A-frame, teepee or mouse-hole style cat beds also make good hiding places, but use creativity in placement. Instead of sticking them out in the middle of the room, nestle the bed in a corner, on the bed, on a chair or behind a piece of furniture.
- ❖ **Prey.** When it comes to the outdoors, prey tops the list of reasons why your cat tries to bolt out the door. These instinctual predators see all those little critters scurrying, flying, hopping, slithering and crawling outside, but when your cats turn from looking out the windows and glance around the indoor environment, do they see



anything interesting? Your cat looks for movement, stimulation and a chance for a hunt. Supply these simulations indoors by incorporating a couple of interactive play sessions daily. Interactive toys enable you to move the target like prey. The more you simulated the movements a mouse, bird, cricket or fly makes, the more satisfaction your cat will find.

When cats hunt, they use bushes, trees and rocks for cover. Your couch, chairs, pillows, boxes or bags with the handles removed can serve as cover. In an open living room, toss a few pillows around or scatter a couple of open paper bags. Your cat will love the opportunity to hide behind a pillow or peer out from inside a paper bag while stalking prey.

Try to provide at least two to three interactive sessions a day and time them for when your cat is naturally active. For example, try to play before you leave in the morning, when you come home at night and again before bedtime.

Carry Your Cat

If you want your cat to enjoy the outdoors safely, use a harness and leash, and do not allow your cat to walk out the door on its own. Always carry your cat across the threshold to teach that the only way out is in your arms.

By faithfully applying these techniques, you can help your cat enjoy the safety and comfort of indoors.

For more information about cat behavior

Please visit www.sfspca.org

Pam Johnson-Bennett has written five books on cat behavior and is the resident pet expert at <http://ivillage.com>.