Cat Behavior Program Overview

Adding Enrichment, Treatment and Modification Techniques To Your Visits

On the agenda today:

- Mechanics of the cat program
- Resources for new and long term comforters
- In cage enrichment/ Feliway
- Read To Calm
- Blue Dot Comforting
- Clicker Training
- Putting the toolbox to use

But... I know all of this already... why am I here??

➤Refresher on the tools you already have
➤How to incorporate multiple tools into a visit
➤Better understanding of when to use these tools
➤Freedom to use them as you see fit... only positive things can come from using them properly
➤Let's talk about Head Start!

Mechanics of the cat program

- How do we decide which cat needs what?
  - Daily rounds of all cats in our care, often twice a day
  - Behavior assessment
  - Comforter notes
  - Staff observations
  - Notes on Behavior Alert Board
  - Notes from owner/ foster parent

  - Fluid… behavior changes every day
  - Daily needs and "to do" list… condos, communal, foster, adding Blue Dot… it's a balancing act!

Resources if you're just starting out, or want a refresher

How to Speak Cat, Maddie's Fund

- ▶ https://www.maddiesfund.org/feline-communication-how-to-speak-cat.htm
- ▶ Great intro to body language

Pamela Johnson- Bennett, Cat Behaviorist

- ▶ Tons and tons of cat behavior tips and tricks, everything you might need to know!
- ▶ Fantastic books on behavior, modification, management and treatment of all behaviors
- ▶ https://www.catbehaviorassociates.com/

Jackson Galaxy, Cat Behaviorist

- ▶ Also has tons of tips, tricks and great videos on all things cat related
- ▶ https://www.jacksongalaxy.com/blog/

Karen Pryor, leader in force free dog training

- ▶ Great resource for information on clicker training cats to manage, modify and treat behaviors, as well as for mental stimulation
- ▶ https://www.clickertraining.com/cat-training

Always check out the Resource Library in VIC… there are presentations and trainings available there.

In cage enrichment

- Daily enrichment
- How does this work as a volunteer?
  - JV shifts as well as adult shifts
  - Make and, in most cases, pass out enrichment
- Multiple benefits:
  - Sensory stimulation- engage all senses
  - Mental stimulation- busy mind leads to calm body
  - New toys!
  - Gain more information about our cats

  - Shredded paper, treats, toys, cat nip, boxes/ bags/ egg cartons, essential oils, frozen treats… we'll try anything!!!

Feliway

- Daily assignment, dissipates after about five hours

- Feliway… a feline facial pheromone analogue. That means that it is a man-made version of the substance your cat deposits when she rubs her cheek on your leg or furniture. This substance is a signal that cats use to mark objects in their "territory". The smell tells the cat she is in a safe place. Feliway can be used to make a new place or situation "feel" more familiar and safe for cats.

- Happy messages: When comfortable and happy, cats mark their territory as familiar by rubbing their face against corners, furniture, people, or other cats at home. They leave an odorless message known as a feline facial pheromone. When present in the environment, these "happy messages" provide comfort and security to cats.

- Harmony messages: Mother cats communicate with her kittens through natural messages released into the air. These "harmony messages" are called cat appeasing pheromones. They help maintain social bonds between cats of all ages.

- Territory messages: Cats communicate with other cats through natural messages left in their territory. When they scratch an object in their territory they leave "territory messages". This provides a visual message (scratch marks) and the "territory message" says that "this is mine".

- We know for sure that it can't hurt them… but it may not reach all cats.

Read To Calm

- Just pick a cat and read!
- Will benefit any cat, there is no possible negative result from this interaction
- You can also just talk, or sing to them (the talk only visit)
- Avoid treats or touch during read to calm

- Benefits:
  - Takes all pressure off to interact
  - Helps with both fear and frustration
  - Teaches that not every visit leads to overstimulation or increased fear

Blue Dot Comforting

- Fairly simple online course with online test to complete, as well as have completed 40 hours of comforting
- Blue Dot cats can be found in any area of the shelter, most commonly found in the cat condos
- Notes from cat specialist in front of Blue Dot binders give tips on behavior and needs

- Behaviors identified from rounds, assessment, comforter notes, staff comments, intake behavior, behavior for shelter med team
- Treatments are based on needs and response to interaction/ housing
- Can modify and manage behaviors while in shelter, build on skills for an adopter

Clicker Training

- Enrichment
- Mental stimulation
- Build relationships
- Modify behaviors
- Increase appeal to adopters

- Find training steps in VIC, in the Volunteer Resource Library, under Cat Care

Putting it all together...

▶ Using these tools in conjunction with one another can modify behaviors

▶ Understanding fundamentals of body language and how to respond is really important!

▶ Working towards a more formal Head Start program

  ▶ Treatment plans for cats to be enacted by comforters, designed by cat specialist

  ▶ Modifying specific behaviors, more targeted visits

  ▶ Can offer more to adopters

Different behaviors need different things: fearful cats

▶ We want to minimize fear through low stress interactions

▶ Recognize situational fear vs chronic fear

    ▶ Looking through comforter notes is the best way for you to have a sense of this

    ▶ Fearful with you, but other notes are indicate a good response?

    ▶ Accepting with you but other notes indicate fearful responses?

    ▶ What could cause these differences

    ▶ Is it chronic?

Treatments/ enrichment for fearful cats: the basics

▶ Scents offered on a daily basis: essential oils as approved by shelter vet, Feliway

▶ Making sure kuranda is covered at all times and that there's a soft, appropriate bed under the kuranda

▶ Dry food at all times, wet at normal feeding times and used as a part of visits

▶ Quietest cage/ housing possible

▶ Communal housing if appropriate

▶ Why/ when staff only?

Treatments and tools for the fearful cat

- Read to calm, always
- Clicker work, or modified clicker
- Rewards for response
- Rewards for no response
- Body language tools:
  - Slow approach
  - Never move into their space
  - Adjust as needed

First visits with a fearful cat

- Stand outside of cage, talking to cat
- Observe body language
- Enter cage if possible/ indicated
    - What do those indications look like?
    - Should I stay or should I go?
    - Is the food in the cage eaten?
- Talk to cat
- Offer wet food (or alternative)
- Offer hand
- Absolutely no touch unless explicitly requested
- Talk, offer food, repeat
- Assess body language throughout- when is the cat done?
- Visit may turn to talk only/ read to calm
- There may be many visits of this kind with this cat- desensitizing

Subsequent visits with a fearful cat- introducing new tools

▶ Talk to cat as you enter cage

▶ Observe body language

▶ Click for calm, or a variation

  ▶ Mark behavior

  ▶ Food motivator now offered when behavior is performed

  ▶ Behaviors can be miniscule and nuanced

  ▶ Can add in touch if indicated

▶ Strengthening potential for behavior to be repeated

▶ Taking a step back, repeating this process, or….

▶ When to move forward?

Different behaviors have different needs: low handling threshold, AKA, the "sassy" cat

▶ Keep cat below threshold

▶ Avoid triggers

▶ Understand that this may be a true behavior or purely cage related

▶ Pay attention to comforter notes

▶ May be Blue Dot, will likely have a "keep calm" sign

Treatments/ enrichment for the "sassy" cat: the basics

▶ Scents offered on a daily basis: essential oils as approved by shelter vet, Feliway

▶ Making sure kuranda is covered at all times and that there's a soft, appropriate bed under the kuranda

▶ Dry food at all times, wet at normal feeding times and used as a part of visits

▶ Toys/ enrichment appropriate for that cat

▶ Quiet cage, top cage, condo housing

▶ Communal housing if appropriate

▶ Why/ when staff only?

Treatments and tools for the "sassy' cat

- Read to calm
- Clicker work, or modified clicker
- Play therapy
- Rewards for appropriate interactions/ staying below threshold
- More advanced clicker work
- In cage enrichment- busy work
- Body language tools:
  - Assess before you enter: read notes, watch body language
  - Limit all handling
  - At their pace, on their terms
  - Watch for triggers/ approaching threshold
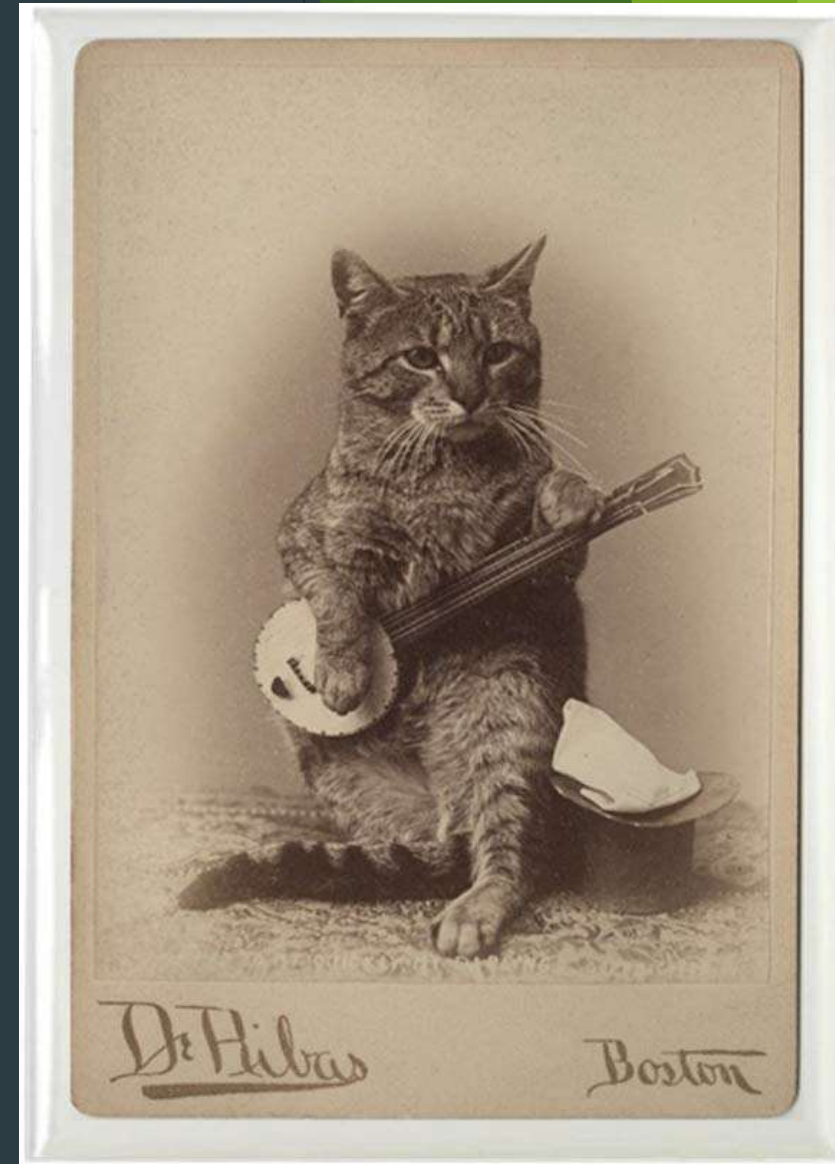 - Change the game

First visits with the "sassy" cat

- Read all previous notes
- Stand outside of cage, talk to cat
- Assess level of stimulation prior to entering the cage
- Talk only?
- Be a tree, an observer
- Enter cage if possible/ indicated
- Do not touch!
- Reward all appropriate moments of engagement
- Pet head/ cheeks
- Leave before cat reaches threshold, rewarding as you leave

Subsequent visits with the "sassy" cat- what tools can we try?

▶ Important: each visit might be different… read their needs!

▶ Clicker work, or variation

    ▶ Mark and reward for increasing amounts of loose body language

    ▶ Mark and reward for appropriately seeking attention

    ▶ Mark and reward for low levels of stimulation

▶ Still not intentionally touching the cat… yep, I said that….

▶ Play therapy

▶ Be open to change, ready for anything!

Different behaviors have different needs: the frustrated cat

▶ May be at, approaching or beyond threshold when you approach

▶ Understanding when/ how to visit is key

▶ Understand that this may be a true behavior or purely cage related

▶ Pay attention to comforter notes

▶ May be Blue Dot, will likely have "Keep Calm" sign

Treatments/ enrichment for the frustrated cat: the basics

▶ Scents offered on a daily basis: essential oils as approved by shelter vet, Feliway

▶ Making sure kuranda is covered at all times and that there's a soft, appropriate bed under the kuranda

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Treatments and tools for the frustrated cat

- ▶ Read to calm
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- ▶ Body language tools:
  - ▶ Assess before you enter: read notes, watch body language
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  - ▶ Watch for triggers/ approaching threshold
  - ▶ Change the game

First visit with the frustrated cat

- Read all previous notes
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- Enter cage if possible/ indicated
- Do not touch!
- Reward all appropriate moments of engagement
- Pet head/ cheeks
- Leave before cat reaches threshold, rewarding as you leave

Subsequent visits with the frustrated cat- what tools can we try?

▶ Important: each visit might be different... read their needs!

▶ Clicker work, or variation

   ▶ Mark and reward for increasing amounts of calm body language

   ▶ Mark and reward for appropriately seeking attention

   ▶ Mark and reward for appropriate play

   ▶ Mark reward for low levels of stimulation

▶ Still not intentionally touching the cat... there it is again!

▶ Play therapy

▶ They will change the game, be prepared!

What about those easy guys?

▶ Always read comforter notes

▶ Try something new:

  ▶ Train to sit

  ▶ Train to touch? (nose or paw are easiest)

  ▶ Train to scratch

▶ Play therapy

▶ Read to calm!

▶ May be JV or Paw 2 approved…. They still need you

Moving forward….

- ▶ Create a tailored Head Start program
- ▶ Identify and target specific cats
- ▶ Communicate needs with Head Start comforters
- ▶ Depends on adherence to handling/ interaction requests
- ▶ Really modify behaviors
- ▶ Increase adoptability
  - ▶ Share training process with adopters
  - ▶ Show progression of behavior
- ▶ Program size (number of cats/ comforters)

Questions? Thoughts?

Thank you!!!!!!