

Can Persistent Litterbox Problem Be Solved?

A feline behaviorist offers steps to retrain a skittish cat to use the litterbox.

Pam Johnson-Bennett

Q: We have a neutered male cat who has been urinating outside his litterbox since we adopted him as a stray kitten four years ago. He has no medical problems. He is urinating in the same spot about 24 inches from the closest litterbox. Sometimes he will use the litterboxes and sometimes he doesn't. When he doesn't, he always urinates in the same spot. How can we train him to use the box? We are at our wits' end, and I fear our cat's days may be numbered.

Feline behaviorist Pam Johnson-Bennett, author of *Think Like a Cat*, says:

I'm so sorry you are going through this but before I go through some options to help you, I have to tell you that euthanasia of a healthy cat doesn't have to be the route for you. If it turns out this problem is not solvable on your own, then rehoming the cat is a better option because the cat may not eliminate outside of the box in a different environment. If you do decide to rehome, you should look for a foster home with someone who is aware of the behavior problem and is willing to see if the problem resolves in a single-cat environment. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's see if we can tackle this.

It is harder to resolve a problem that has been ongoing for several years but let's see what we can do. First of all, the fact that he's eliminating so close to the box tells me that he really wants to do the right thing but something is stopping him from actually getting into the box.

You said that the boxes are kept clean. By that, it should mean that you scoop the boxes at least twice a day and thoroughly scrub out the boxes at least twice a month. Twice-daily scooping is essential so if you haven't been doing that, then it would be the first correction to make. Also, make sure the boxes are big enough for the size of the cats and that you are using an adequate amount of litter. I'd also recommend removing covers because cats generally prefer more escape potential rather than being confined in a box. Boxes that are wedged in corners, in closets or covered boxes with entrances facing walls should be moved. Cats don't require privacy as much as we think they do. They need safety and that's where the feeling of having escape options is more important.

Next, even though you have separated a couple of the boxes, they are all in the same general area. Is there a reason why you don't have at least one litterbox on the main floor of the home? Cats claim certain territories within the home and since this kitty is already skittish, he is probably a lower-ranking cat in the hierarchy and may not feel comfortable in the other cats' home range. The times he eliminates near the box may be after he has been ambushed or after another cat has just used the box or a higher-ranking cat has "reprimanded" him. You said that the cats generally get along except for a few spats. In a multi-cat environment there can actually be much more hostility than you realize because much of it is done through posturing and territorial claims.

This kitty may be eliminating near the box because those the times when he needs to have more escape potential. Where are the areas in the home where this kitty feels more comfortable?

Here's the plan:

1. Make sure you are scooping boxes twice a day
2. Remove all covers from boxes so the cats have more escape potential.
3. Add a couple of litterboxes on the main floor of the home.
4. Set up a Feliway Comfort Zone diffuser in the basement (not next to the litterboxes though). The diffuser contains synthetic feline facial pheromones and they have a calming effect on cats and can help them calmly identify with a territory. The product is available from pet supply stores.
5. Incorporate two or three interactive play sessions with this kitty using a fishing pole-type toy. Bring the kitty in an area away from the other cats so he can relax and concentrate on enjoying the game. The play sessions will help build

confidence, ease tension, and will help him to trust you more.

6. Watch all the cats to see if there is a specific time of day when this cat eliminates inappropriately, or if it happens after an encounter with another cat.

This should get you started. In order to help you more I'd need more specifics about the cat. This is a problem that has been going on longterm so it won't be fixed over night. I applaud the patience you have shown and all that you've done to correct it. Did your veterinarian ever talk to you about any anti-anxiety meds for the kitty?

Finally, even though creating a kitty area in a basement is convenient, it's not necessarily the best for the overall hierarchy.

Let me know if you have questions on any of the above. You can also find step-by-step instructions on interactive playtime, understanding the multi-cat hierarchy, and how to solve litterbox problems in the book, Cat vs. Cat.

Best,
Pam Johnson-Bennett, CABC
IAABC-Certified Animal Behavior Consultant