

Can I Train My Cats to Stay Away From Hamster?

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger, CCBC, discusses cats and their natural hunting instincts.

By Marilyn Krieger

Posted: November 20, 2009, 3 a.m. EST

Q: I have two cats and my son just got a hamster. The cats are very interested in it, and one of them has figured out how to open the cage door. I would like to teach the cats that the hamster is off-limits and the opposite of fun. Do you have any suggestions for me? I don't know what I can use as a deterrent to make them see the hamster as something they want to stay away from.

A: Since it's natural behavior for cats to regard hamsters as potential meals, I highly recommend keeping the hamster in a room that is completely off-limits to the cats. The door of the cage also needs to be outfitted with a latching solution that the cats cannot unfasten. If it isn't possible to keep the cats separated from the hamster, you might want to encourage your son to find a safer home for the hamster that is cat-free. Cats are predators and they are hard-wired to see hamsters and other small animals as potential food sources. Your cats are not doing anything wrong; they are responding from instinct.

Even if the cats can't reach the hamster, the hamster can become stressed by the cat's presence. Just as it's instinctual for a cat to catch and eat small animals, a hamster is hard-wired to stay as far away as possible from a predator. The smell alone of a cat can be enough to traumatize the hamster.

That being said, there are always the rare exceptions where a cat's best friend is a small prey animal such as a mouse or a bird. Pictures and videos of these exceptions are routinely posted and played on YouTube. These situations are rare and usually occur because the two animals have known each other either since birth or since they were a few days old. The cat sees the animal as a buddy, and not an appetizer.

In addition, there are also those unique cats who do not have intense prey drives. To a limited extent they can be trained to not eat the family mouse or bird. I still don't recommend this for two reasons. The first is that cats are predators and their instinct to hunt can easily be triggered and second, it's important to not stress and traumatize a small animal with the smell of the cats.