

My Cat Keeps Waking Me Up Too Early

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger, CCBC, gives tips for altering cat's early-morning demands.

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Q: Our cat wakes us up every day at 4 a.m. It is getting old. She sleeps in our room and bugs me until I get up and feed her, than everything is OK. But then I am up!!! Kitty Kat is about 4 years old and she adopted us about two years ago. Someone dropped her off since we live in a rural area. She is a sweet, gentle orange kitty and has been spayed and she has her claws. She has become part of the family. How can we adjust the 4 a.m. behavior?

A: Kitty Kat's behavior shows how smart she is. She has figured out that if she keeps bothering you early in the morning you will get out of bed and give her what she wants, which is breakfast. The early-morning demands can be stopped with few pre-bedtime activities, feeding schedule changes and by not reinforcing the behavior.

Before going to bed, play an invigorating hunting game with Kitty Kat. Using a fishing pole toy, imitate the hunt, slowing the toy down at the end of the play. After she catches the toy the last time, provide her with a delicious meal. She will eat, groom and then go to sleep, a happy Kitty Kat. Treasure hunts are also appreciated activities. Hide small treats throughout the house on the cat furniture, perches and shelves.

Having food available at night for Kitty Kat will also help stop the early-morning food demands. At night, put food in either a timed feeder or in treat balls. Timed feeders can be programmed to open at set times for a specified amount of time. Since timed feeders have a tendency to be a bit pricey, another alternative is providing Kitty Kat with treat balls that are filled with healthy treats or her regular food. In order to eat the treats, she will have to work a little by rolling the ball around. Additionally, there are puzzle toys with separate compartments that have sliding covers. Kitty Kat's regular food or treats can be placed in the puzzle compartments and she will have to slide the covers back in order to eat.

Animals continue behaviors when they are reinforced for them. You have been reinforcing Kitty Kat's annoying antics by feeding her at 4 each morning. She has figured out that if she bugs you, you will feed her. Along with the feeding schedule additions and pre-bed activities, don't reinforce the behavior by getting up and feeding her at 4. It will be difficult at first, but eventually, when she realizes that you aren't responding in the usual way, she will stop making demands. The food additions, late play activities along with you not responding to her demands should help stop the behavior, allowing you to sleep through the night.