

My Husband Mistreats Our Cat

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger, CCBC, urges the use of humane behavior-modification techniques, not punishment.

By Marilyn Krieger

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Q: My husband and I got into a pretty heated discussion over training our kitty. Our kitty is trained to go outside to go potty and she does really well and never dirties in the house anymore. However, my husband has a certain fluffy red rug in his bathroom and each and every time the door is open to that bathroom, kitty runs in there and pees — even if the door is only open for one minute. She did this last night again, and my husband got very angry with her. I picked up the rug and showed it to her and put her outside, then I took the rug and put it in the washer and I heard the cat screaming. My husband had picked her up by the nape and was scolding her and then threw her outside. I totally disagreed with him doing this as I feel it is abuse. What do you think?

He already has kitty traumatized because his way of training her was to rub her nose in her mess in the house and spank her and throw her outside. As a result of this, kitty won't come to me if I reach my hand out to her — she runs.

Any advice I can give my husband would be greatly appreciated. I can't stand any kind of abuse to animals and I feel this is abuse!

A: I never recommend punishment (spanking, rubbing noses in excrement, scolding, etc). It is inhumane, ineffective and it severs the cat-human bond. Typically, cats associate the punishment with the person who is hurting and punishing them. They do not connect the punishment with the behavior they are being reprimanded for. Your little kitty is associating people with the act of being hurt, which is why she is running from you; she is afraid she will be hurt. Punishment also often results in escalation of behaviors and the development of new unwanted behaviors.

There are humane and much better methods for eliminating and changing unwanted behaviors. These methods build and strengthen the bonds between the cat and her person and they help increase the feelings of security and confidence, helping to decrease unwanted behaviors. They include a combination of identifying the reason for the behavior, some changes in the environment, such as adding cat boxes and behavior modification.

Cats have legitimate reasons for their behaviors. Behaviors are typically the result of an event or a response to something in the environment. Instead of using punishment and abuse, it is important to first figure out the triggers for the behavior, and then modify or eliminate the triggers. Since unappreciated behaviors can be caused by medical problems, it is important to rule out any medical issues first by taking the cat to her veterinarian for a checkup. From what you've written, though, it appears your cat went to the bathroom on the rug because she does not have access to a cat box in the house. Cats need to have access to clean cat boxes inside of their homes; if they don't, they are very likely to have accidents inside the house. The cat-box rule is one box per cat and one for the house. If you have one cat, then ideally there should be two cat boxes located in different areas of the house that are scooped every day.

There may be other causes for her behavior as well. Instead of punishment, I recommend determining what these causes might be and changing them and then using humane and nonpunishment- based behavior modification techniques to modify/stop the behavior.