

## 7.22 PROTOCOL FOR STATUS-RELATED AGGRESSION IN CATS

Cats do not have social systems that are identical to those of dogs or humans, but they still have a system wherein some individuals have higher rank or lower rank than others. Usually any conflicts about controlling status occur only with other cats. Occasionally some cats manipulate people in a manner similar to that of dominantly aggressive dogs. This has been termed *assertion*, or *status-related aggression*.

Some cats have been described as disliking attention or as rejecting petting ("the leave-me-alone bite"). This certainly can be a component of status-related aggression, but for many cats, rejection by biting is only an indicator of an underlying problem. If clients watch these cats closely, they often note that the cat stares at them and that, for reasons they cannot explain, they will avoid the cat's stare. Some cats constantly block clients' access to furniture or to pathways by standing in the way. Some cats rub everywhere a particular person has been or rub (or even spray) the people that they are trying to control. As long as the cat is not aggressive in these situations, there should be few concerns, but many of these cats actively solicit attention by jumping into a client's lap and then biting the client if they are petted or shifted. Cats with very exaggerated status-related aggression may lie on their people, batting at them to make them settle in positions that the cat controls and then biting the people if they do not do this or if they move. Some cats block accessways and stare at or hiss at the person who tries to go around them. Clients find themselves not doing things that they would otherwise do because they feel uncomfortable about it. These cats are very successful at passively controlling their people. This can be true to such an extent that many people do not realize it is happening.

Clients complain that, at times, these cats like to be petted, but at other times they are savage if they try to cuddle the cats. This occurs because the cat has to control the situation. When the cat initiates the petting, it might tolerate petting if the client does not get very manipulative (which may be how cats perceive effusive petting and cuddling); when the client initiates the petting, the cat often resists by using aggression. A hallmark of these cats, unlike many of those exhibiting other forms of aggression, is that they seldom swat with their claws first. Instead they become stiff, may twitch their tail, erect the hair down their back and tail, put their ears back, dilate their pupils, unsheathe their claws, growl, and bite.

A final similarity between these cats and dogs with dominance aggression is that both occur at social maturity. Social maturity begins later (probably between 2 and 4 years of age) in cats than in dogs. Clients are often unable to understand why the cat "changed." The client did not necessarily "do" anything to cause the change; the change is related to the manner in which the cats now perceive the world. The same thing happens to humans in their teens and early 20s.

The key to controlling status-related aggression is the same as that for controlling dominance aggression—do not let the cat have control. This is more difficult than it sounds because most of the cat's behaviors have been so passive that the client has not even recognized them as aggressive. Do not give up. These cats may never be cuddly (and you would be well advised to never expect them to be so), but they can learn to live harmoniously in the household and will usually do well with a cat that is cuddly. Finally, it is critical to remember that these cats are potentially very dangerous. Cats with profound status-related aggression look for openings

when the person is unsuspecting (e.g., when they are talking on the telephone) and will bite without preamble and then leave.

### Checklist

- 1. Avoid all situations in which you know that the cat might react inappropriately.
- 2. Be suspicious of these cats when they jump into your lap. Watch them carefully. At the first sign of any unsheathed claws, tensing of muscles, twitching of tail, movement of ears, or rippling of back, stand up and let the cat fall from your lap. Do not pick them up or shove them. These are challenges, and you will be bitten. This all happens quickly.
- 3. If you feel that you cannot react quickly enough in the previously mentioned situation, or the cat does not give a lot of warning (*which is not unusual*), keep a foghorn, air canister, or water pistol with you at all times. At the first sign of aggression or if any of the above appear, blast the cat. Later, when the cat is calm, talk to it sweetly and give it a treat. Do not pet the cat or dangle body parts in front of the cat.
- 4. If the cat appears calm in your lap, you can pet the cat once or twice. You, not the cat, always must terminate the attention and regulate the amount of it. Do not get involved in a love fest—you are putting yourself at risk. Always keep the cat a little hungry for attention. Stand up and let the cat fall from your lap before it is ready to stop the attention.
- 5. If you are too fearful of the cat to work on Steps 2 to 4 above, do not interact with the cat. Do not feel guilty—the cat does not feel guilty.
- 6. Put a bell on the cat's collar (use a breakaway collar) so that you know where the cat is at all times. Monitor its movements. Do not let the cat surprise you with a manipulative attack. Carry a water pistol, foghorn, or air canister with you at all times and use it.
- 7. Do not let the cat control your access to something. Ask the cat to move. Try throwing a toy that the cat will chase. If the cat will not move, use something like a broom to gently move the cat. Do not use your hand—the cat will perceive this as a challenge (the broom may also be a challenge), and you will not be able to fight back.
- 8. You can teach the cat to do tricks that require the cat to defer to you in exchange for small food rewards (tiny pieces of tinned shrimp or sardines, boiled chicken livers, or shredded boiled chicken). Decide what you want the cat to do (lie down or reach up and touch your hand with his or her paw). Using the food treat, guide the cat into that position using a command (e.g., "down" or "shake") and as soon as the cat accidentally or initially does the behavior say "Good Simba (or whatever)" and give the cat the treat. Keep the cat a little hungry by offering smaller meals so that you can practice these deference exercises frequently. Keep a water pistol or other deterrents handy. If at any time the cat's pupils dilate, its ears go back, or it shows any of the other signs discussed previously, blast the cat. Wait until the cat comes to you for attention before interacting again, and watch to make sure that it is not setting you up for a challenge.

- 9. If the cat rubs against you and marks you, remove yourself from the situation after one or two rubs. Then the cat *cannot* control the situation or passively believe or demonstrate that it has manipulated you.
- 10. Remember, dogs and cats do not have identical social systems. Not all the same behaviors will be exhibited by dogs and cats, nor will the signals "mean" the same thing in the same context. If you are more familiar with dogs than cats, watch your cat's specific behaviors. Bruce Fogle's book *Know Your Cat* can help.
- 11. Some cats are so persistent that they would benefit from antianxiety medication. Remember that this is to be used in addition to, not instead of, behavior and environmental modification.
- 12. If you do not wish to monitor the cat, isolate it when you cannot or will not be able to work with it. This can be as simple as closing a door.
- 13. Finally, some cats are too dangerous to keep in some households. If that is the case, very few of them can go to another very special home. Please do not turn these cats loose on the streets.
- 14. If anyone is scratched or bitten by your cat, seek competent medical help immediately. Cat bites and scratches become infected easily and can be dangerous.