

Keeping Cats Out of Trees
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Our friend Janice has a cat, Amber, who climbs trees. Amber is damaging the smaller trees, and gets stuck in the bigger ones. Janice wants to know how to stop this behavior.

One obvious solution is to not let Amber go outside. For many reasons, this is probably the best alternative. Another possibility is to restrict Amber's access to the trees by keeping her on a leash (this should only be done under supervision to prevent injuries), keeping her in an outdoor enclosure, or placing barriers such as slick aluminum sheeting or wire around the trunk of the tree prevent Amber from climbing them.

None of these ideas do anything to change Amber's motivation for climbing. They simply prevent the behavior from occurring. Sometimes changing motivation produces better long-term results. As with any behavior problem, the first step is to figure out why Amber wants to climb trees. There are several possibilities. Amber might be escaping danger such as dogs or other cats, trying to catch squirrels or birds or just trying to find a high perch to hang out on. These different motivations may require different solutions. Once Janice knows the motivation for Amber's climbing, she'll be able to use a relevant solution.

If Amber is climbing to escape harassment from the family dog, the harassment must be stopped. If Amber is perching in her owner's trees just to have a high place to watch the yard, providing her with her own high (but not too high) person-made perch outside may help. If Amber is climbing to catch birds, squirrels or other prey, it may be difficult to change her motivation. Cats don't just hunt when hungry, so extra feedings probably won't help. Restricting Amber's access to the trees may be the only reasonable option.

Punishment is not likely to help, because Janice won't be able to catch Amber every time she climbs a tree. Unless punishment can be delivered immediately and consistently, it's better not to use it at all. It can cause Amber to become fearful or aggressive and is unlikely to change her behavior.