

Preventing The Litterbox Blues
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Recently, I did a consult with Ann and Tom because their cats Roscoe and Baker were not using their litterbox. At the end of the consult, Ann asked me “Is there anything we could have done to prevent this problem from developing?” My answer was yes, there probably were some things that could have prevented their problem. Most litterbox problems can be prevented, if the owners are willing to put in a little time and effort.

The key to preventing litterbox problems is to try to meet the behavioral needs of the cat. Animal behavior is beginning to tell us what those needs are so that we can better meet them. The first thing that cats need is an easily accessible litterbox. If Fluffy has to go down three flights of stairs and navigate all kinds of stored items in the darkest end of the basement to get to her box, she probably won't go. A box that is easy to get to and in a reasonably quiet place is much more attractive to a cat.

Second is to provide enough boxes for all the cats in the household. A good rule of thumb is to have one box for each cat. This way they don't have to use a box that was recently used by another cat in the household. This is related to the third thing that cats prefer and that is a clean box. Scooping the box or boxes out daily may prevent Garfield from using your clean laundry basket.

Fourth, pay attention to the characteristics of the box. Some cats prefer not to have lids on their boxes, others seem to like the privacy. The size of the box is also important. A bigger cat will need a bigger box.

Finally, it seems that most cats prefer a fine-grained sandy sort of cat litter in their boxes. They also seem to dislike heavily scented litters. If you aren't sure about what litter or box characteristics your cat prefers, do an experiment. Set up a second litterbox that differs from your cat's regular box. Try a different kind of litter, or put a lid on the box (or try it without the lid) and see which box your cat uses. Be systematic and only try one thing at a time. Give the cat a choice for a week or two with each thing you change to see what she really prefers.

An ounce of prevention is worth at least a pound of carpet cleaning solution.