

Soap's Aggression & Butters' Modeling

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Three and a half years ago my girlfriend, Lauren, selected out our first cat from a litter of Turkish Angoras. He was incredibly cute and unique as she he had two differently-colored eyes. Lauren immediately grabbed him and named him Soap as his fur was bright white.

As a kitten, Soap was reinforced by attention from humans and automatic reinforcement from playing with his toys. During Soap's early years, my friend Mike and I played with Soap and negatively influenced Soap's behavior. We poked at Soap and wrestled him around and he responded by swatting and biting our hands. We played with Soap regularly and the older he got the rougher we played. We would chase and wrestle with him until it was clear he had enough or we couldn't catch him anymore.

But eventually, anytime someone attempted to pet Soap he would attack their hands even if this had produced immediate punishment. Mike and I had unintentionally apparently had taught Soap to behave aggressively. A human hand moving towards Soap at a close distance evoked Soap's swatting, clinging, and biting the hand. This misbehavior may have been strengthened by attention or the activity itself. As we were getting tired of his attacks, we implemented a series of procedures to reduce his aggression. Also, as Soap was getting older his claws became long and sharp so his aggression went from playful to painful.

We first introduced positive punishment to reduce Soap's behavior. When a hand coming towards Soap caused him to claw or swat we would grab the skin of his neck and strictly say, "No Soap!" Picking a cat up by its neck skin is perfectly safe, like grabbing a child by the ear,

but many cats react negatively. Such punishment only slightly reduced his aggression and soon he began avoiding us.

As we were unsure of the reinforcers maintaining his misbehavior we removed various antecedents. We agreed not to put our hands near Soap. This approach failed because some people attempted to pet Soap even after previous petting had been followed by Soap's aggression.

We also had failed to reinforce Soap's desirable behavior. So now when Soap did not attack anyone for a short duration and instead played with his toys we gave him treats. However, our reinforcement schedule was lean and this did not reduce his misbehavior.

When Soap was about a year old and continued to misbehave we decided to get another cat for Soap to play with. Another cat could evoke alternative behavior and act as a model.. When we selected our second cat, Butters, we noticed right away that he would work for attention. In the shelter Butters meowed when we did not pet him, but purred when we did pet him.

Adding Butters to our family was the perfect treatment for Soap's misbehavior. Not only do Soap and Butters play with one another by wrestling around constantly, but apparently Butter's affectionate behavior, which we reinforce, has gotten Soap to increasingly behave likewise. On being petted, Soap now like Butters rolls around on his back and purrs, a sound we had never heard from Soap before Butters arrival. Also Soap's misbehavior towards humans has stopped almost entirely as he can behave aggressively towards his little brother in a harmless way.

Butters still meows constantly when attention is withheld, but he purrs and rolls around on his back when attention is offered as now does Soap. All of our friends have noted that

Butters has tamed Soap. But some still fear Soap as they were victims of Soaps' aggression. We are now focusing on Butters' constant meowing when attention is absent, but that's another story.

