

Chatty cat needs some retraining

Does your cat like to talk to you? Does he make noise to be fed or to wake you up during the early morning hours? If so, you are not alone.

A reader submitted this issue to me and asked if there was anything she could do about an overly boisterous cat.



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THE CAT DOC

She adopted a neutered male cat from the shelter

about a year and a half ago, and his constant meowing just keeps getting worse and worse.

He meows at 6 a.m. to be fed; he meows when her dogs need to go out; he meows to say hello. She thinks he meows every time he moves or thinks!

The cat was checked by a vet and no health issues were found. Squirting him with a water bottle didn't work. The family has tried positive reinforcement by petting him when he is quiet, but this only works for about two seconds. She and her husband work from home so they hear their cat all day. He is totally sweet, cuddly and lovable but driving them crazy.

There are normally vocal cats, and certain Oriental breeds of cats do a lot of talking. Health problems such as pain and high blood

pressure are causes for vocalization. If you have a cat that vocalizes excessively, he should be checked for these and other medical issues. Unfortunately, attention-seeking behavior is the most common cause of excessive vocalization in young, healthy cats.

The worst thing you can do is acknowledge an overly vocal cat, because this is exactly what the cat wants and it reinforces the behavior. You need to ignore the cat, use ear plugs, or put him away somewhere so that the noise doesn't bother you. You also need to be sure that his needs for play are being met and he is not bored. It is difficult to ignore the vocalizing behavior, but this is crucial to success.

There are no surgical procedures to "de-meow" a cat and there are no "meow" collars. Changing vocalization depends primarily on behavior modification techniques that owners need to use on problem cats.

- Engage a vocal cat in interactive play for at least five minutes twice daily.
- Try to find toys that the cat will play with on his own, at times in between.
- Consider creating a window perch and setting up an outside bird feeder so that the cat has something else to focus on during the day.

If the vocalization is pri-

marily centered on feeding, get an automated feeder so that you are no longer directly responsible for each meal. There is a great toy called a Slim Cat, a ball device that dispenses food when a cat rolls it around and plays with it. Use this as part of his regular feeding to keep him active and satisfied.

Yelling and squirting water are not very effective for stopping feline vocalization. Some cats enjoy the negative attention as much as positive attention.

If all of these ideas fail, you need to discuss the problem behavior with your veterinarian. You need to investigate whether your cat is vocalizing due to some stress or change in the environment. Other treatment options might include an herbal calming remedy or treat (such as Composure) or even prescription anti-anxiety medication. The oral drug fluoxetine helps some cats with problem vocalization.

The bottom line is that you want to enjoy your cat and you don't want him to be unhealthy, stressed or anxious.

Be sure you are training him and he is not training you. Excessive vocalization can be changed if the correct steps are taken.

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