

Foiling the Feline Houdini

by Karen Commings

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You're getting ready to leave the house. As you put on your coat, you notice Sammie, your cat, eyeballing you from a few feet away with a look that seems to be determining how fast he will have to run past you to get outside. You slowly open the door, hoping to step across the threshold before he runs for it. But, just as you try to squeeze through the opening, Sammie darts past you in a disappearing act that rivals the great magician, Harry Houdini.

For many cat owners, keeping their feline companions safely indoors represents the optimum in care. Cats living indoors are not at risk from life-threatening diseases or injuries from traffic or predators - human or animal. An indoor cat is less likely to be infected by fleas, ticks, or worms, and is less likely to get lost. If you live with a cat who appreciates indoor living, keeping him inside is no problem. If you live with a cat for whom the great outdoors constantly beckons, preventing him from escaping the confines of your home requires consistent behavior modification.

Some cats never want to go outside, but some want to run out the door every time it's opened. "Most escapees are cats that have recently gone outside," says Drew Weigner, DVM, diplomate of the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners, whose practice is The Cat Doctor in Atlanta, Georgia. "They can be newly adopted stray cats, outside cats made into inside cats, cats that got outside by accident, etc. It seems the call of the wild is a strong innate instinct."

If your cat is sexually intact, he or she may want to go outside to satisfy biological urges. This is compounded if suitors are hanging around. "Wanting outside is magnified during breeding season," says Dr. Weigner. "Usually spring and fall."

Spaying or neutering may help keep feline escape artist from wanting to roam. "To some degree, neutering (using this as a generic term, applicable to both male and female) does help mitigate the desire to roam, but many neutered cats still want to go outside!" says Dr. Weigner.

Once a cat wants to go outside, it takes two things to change the behavior. One is consistency. "Whatever method you choose, do it the same way, over and over again," says Dr. Weigner. "It's fine to use more than one method at the same time, just as long as they're both done consistently."

The second key to modifying your cat's behavior is time and patience. "It may take several months of consistent behavior modification before a cat stops trying to go outside," says Dr. Weigner.

Both positive and negative methods to train a cat to stay indoors may help. Just remember never to use physical punishment. Punishing a cat destroys his trust in you and reduces his self confidence.

"Redirecting your cat's attention with toys can work, as well as throwing the cat a treat as you exit," says Dr. Weigner. Keep a basket of toys such as rubber or ping pong balls or crumpled paper balls near the door to throw for your cat to chase as you leave. You'll be accomplishing two goals - giving your cat exercise and keeping him from escaping - at the same time.

Leave a trail of treats in a location away from the door for your cat to follow to distract him as you leave.

"Shaking a can of pennies when cat starts to dart, using a squirt bottle, indoor electronic fences,

and scat mats can all be effective deterrents if used consistently," says Dr. Weigner. "A squirt bottle has the advantage of being effective when you're trying to get in the door if the door is barely opened and the cat is squirted when she puts her nose to the crack."

If possible, install a storm or screen door in addition to your regular door to give you extra protection when you come or go. "Double doors are a great idea where feasible," says Dr. Weigner. If your cat pushes on the window screens to let himself out, make sure the screens are securely latched, especially if you live in a high rise apartment building.

Enriching your indoor cat's environment goes a long way in changing his desire to go outside. "Another important aspect to changing escaping behavior is to give your cat an alternative," says Dr. Weigner. "It often helps to make a window ledge at an open window so he can see outside. It also may help to put a bird feeder near the window to attract wildlife."

Regardless of the method you use, don't reinforce the desire to go out by letting him out. "This is a vitally important part of the behavior modification, regardless of which other method is concurrently used," says Dr. Weigner. "Every time the cat gets outside, he starts back at square one again."