Client: “My 10-year-old cat is attacking my new puppy! I have scheduled an appointment to have him declawed so that he doesn’t scratch the pup’s eyes out. Do you have any other recommendations?”

The above is from an actual call I received. At this point, you may be thinking to yourself, “Another cat article in a magazine about dog training and behavior?! What’s the deal?!” The deal is that millions of American dog-owning households also have feline residents. Most of these people already recognize the importance of training their dogs, or at least they know that professionals exist to help with behavior challenges they may face with their canine friends. These discerning humans are becoming ever more aware that cats can be trained too, and normal challenges in a cat-dog household can be addressed rather than just accepted. Unfortunately, many of these well-meaning cat and dog owners have a lot to learn about the behavioral needs of their pets, especially the feline part of the triad. Who better to guide the process than their familiar dog trainer or behavior consultant?

This article will briefly address the basics of partial-toe amputations (colloquially known as “declawing,” medically termed “onychectomy”). It will provide a quick overview of why a client may consider the procedure for the perceived safety of their dog, and how you can redirect the focus onto real solutions. It will also examine the special needs of cats who have already had partial-toe amputations and live in households with dogs. The goal is to provide you with information to guide clients away from opting for the unnecessary declawing of their cat, and provide guidance on making the household safer for cats who have already had the procedure.

Part 1: So, Your Clients Are Considering Declawing

Partial-Toe Amputation: “Say What?”

It may seem strange, or not, that someone would want to amputate any part of their companion animal. Of course spaying and neutering could potentially add to the pro-surgical modification team, but for the purpose of this article we will accept that sterilization procedures are generally considered beneficial on a population level, even if not appropriate for every individual of the two species. While the dog world deals with controversies over ear cropping, tail docking, debarking, and the rare case of partial-toe amputation, the cat world generally faces the single considerable issue of partial-toe amputations. There is no database tracking every partial-toe amputation procedure, but even conservative estimates would place the number of declawed cats currently in the U.S. in the millions.

Onychectomy involves partially amputating the toe at the first joint. It is done through a variety of methods, using a scalpel or laser, and even occasionally through the use of dog nail clippers. Veterinarian techniques run the gambit from expensive, highly technical procedures involving nerve blocks, precise surgical techniques, and intensive post-op care to a “side of fries” removal with a dog nail clipper during a spay or neuter. While there are occasions when onychectomy is beneficial for medical reasons — such as injury or rare conditions like Ehlers-Danlos syndrome — it is primarily done for human convenience. Most declawed cats have amputations on their front feet only, but some vets also perform partial-toe amputations on the rear paws. For more in depth information on onychectomy procedures and repercussions, why clients consider declawing, and the psychological processes of veterinarians who perform the procedures, see the links in the Resources section.

Cat-Dog Interventions: Focus On Real Solutions to Avoid the False Solution of Declawing

Clients are most likely to bring up declawing during a situation involving changes in the household structure or negative changes in the interactions of current residents. For example, a dog is being added to a household with a cat, a new cat is being added to a household with a dog, or households are being combined. It may also be put forth as a solution for cats who are suddenly or progressively becoming aggressive toward the cohabiting dog. Taking away the cat’s primary weapons, the claws, may initially seem like a safe way to keep the dog’s eyes from being scratched out. And believe me, clients often specifically bring up the safety of the dog’s eyes!
Our ideal clients either come to us before there are problems between their furry household residents, or at the first sign of conflict. For many reasons, these clients rarely even consider partial-toe amputations, or if they have, they are not yet dedicated to the idea. However, sometimes proactive clients are facing pressure from a roommate or family member who is convinced that there will be a problem and pushes for declawing as a preventive. These groups are generally the easiest to educate and provide with alternative solutions. Our more challenging clients are those who have reached higher frustration levels with animals who are already having negative interactions. The frustration can be due solely to the problem behaviors, or can be related to distress in another area of their lives that pushes them past their threshold for dealing with the problem behaviors. All scenarios require an evaluation of what the client’s real concerns and goals are in order to design an appropriate plan.

Here’s where you really take out your Sherlock Holmes cap and partake in a bit of sleuthing. What are your client’s hot buttons? Generally I start by asking, in as neutral a tone as possible, if the client is aware of the intricacies of a declawing surgery. Remember, most people are not aware. For many, simply explaining what the process actually entails will dissuade them from continuing to consider it as a viable option.

**Is your client hyper-focused on monetary expense?**
That’s an easy segue into the high price of having a qualified surgeon perform the procedure and the expense of the extra care the cat will require over his or her lifetime. These expenses can involve medications, supplements, and special physical therapy to minimize the damage caused, directly or indirectly, by the surgery. There are also many cases in which cats require future surgeries to address claw regrowth and infection. You can then tack on the likely expense of replacing furniture, carpets, and the like if the cat refuses to use the litter box post-surgery, which is a common occurrence.

**Does your client have any physical or mental challenges that he or she deals with?** This is a tricky issue, both legally and ethically, but depending on your relationship and what information the client has shared with you, this could be an area to encourage empathy with how the cat would feel if his toes were amputated.

**What kind of a dog owner are the clients?** You may be able to reference regular care they provide their dog, either at home or through a professional such as a groomer or veterinarian. If they regularly trim their dog’s nails, brush his teeth, or take him in for haircuts, you can guide them into understanding they can do the same for the cat. Trimming the nails regularly takes away the sharp end of the claw that inflicts the most damage.

**Is your client is hyper-focused on the safety of the dog?** This perfectly positions you to address the potential for cats to bite, which is far more dangerous in most cases than a scratch. More research needs to be done to demonstrate whether or not declawed cats are more prone to biting. However, it is likely that many cats escalate to biting more quickly than they would if they had the ability to send out a lower-level request for distance through use of their claws.

Some combination of the above will address most client concerns, both logical and emotional. You are then able to guide them into a true solution for their cat-dog relationship issues through environmental management, antecedent arrangement, behavior modification techniques, and so on.

**Part 2: Working with a Declawed Cat**

While preventing cats from having partial-toe amputations is a vital element to address in some cat-dog interaction cases, it is likely you will frequently work with cats who have already had the procedure done. These cats may have been acquired after the surgery, or your clients may have had the surgery done prior to engaging your services. Clients may be aware of the problems inherent in cats with partial-toe amputations and feel guilty about putting the cat through it. On the other hand, they may be totally naive about the issue. Most fall somewhere else along the spectrum. I recommend you gently find out where your client is coming from so that you can best address his or her willingness and ability.
to make cat-friendly choices going forward. It is your job to bring your clients into a state of mind where they can comfortably agree with suggestions that will enhance the mental and physical wellbeing of their cat, while meeting the safety needs of both their cats and dogs.

Declawed Cats Have Special Environmental Needs

Cats with partial-toe amputations have special needs related to the absence of their claws. Claws are used for everyday feline activities such as climbing, grooming, exercise, defense, and hunting. Climbing and escape options are important in every home with a cat, but are particularly vital in homes that also have a dog. Even in a household where the cat-dog interactions have always been harmonious, it is critical that cats, who have the instincts of both a predator and prey species, feel they can find their way to safety. Environmental adjustments need to be made for their reduced physical abilities, as well as the increased risks of pain and physical dysfunction. The strategy is to provide easy access to low physical impact resources as alternatives to confrontation with a cohabiting dog.

Easy Access

There are two primary elements to consider when thinking about how accessible an escape option is for a declawed cat:

CAN the cat physically traverse the path to the cat-safe area and the safety object itself?

WILL the cat utilize the area?

For example, the photos on page 72 show a creative shelving set-up for a multi-cat and dog household, but only one of the cats uses it. Why? Hint: the cat who uses the area is young, healthy, athletic, thin, clawed, and gets along very well with the dogs. The other cat is approximately eight years old, plump, suffers pain and dysfunction from partial-toe amputations on all four paws, and does not have a friendly relationship with the dogs. These shelves are too difficult for her to reach and ascend quickly, are not wide enough for her voluptuous curves, and offer very little traction. Access to this area also requires multiple jumps onto hard, unforgiving surfaces, which increases the pain in her paws. While she physically could navigate through the obstacles during a non-threatening situation, she rightly does not feel safe or secure enough to do so in any circumstance.

Appropriately designed cat highways can provide a safe and enriching path for declawed cats to navigate through an area of potential tension in the house. Kitty highways generally provide a route high above the action, and incorporate multiple areas of entrance or egress in the design. Paths can be built to suit a variety of budgets, and can include anything from basic shelving and furniture enlisted in a dual-purpose role to extravagant designer items created specifically for the purpose. Remember that the pathways must be easily accessible, sturdy, wide enough, and provide a non-slip surface. Elements of the cat highway should also be chosen with an eye toward reducing impact on the cat's body during movement. Ramps and stairs provide a healthier alternative than an access point that requires the cat to jump up or down. If there is a spot that requires a jump, consider installing an impact-reducing, non-slip material, such as rubber matting. There are many online resources for inspiration to suit any client's needs. One of my favorites is at www.hauspanther.com (see full link under Resources).
immediately adopt their new trail as the preferred route. However, some cats need to be shown how great this new thing is, or may need encouragement to navigate a certain element that is novel to them. For a cat who is bold or inquisitive, you might simply place the cat on a portion of her new route and she will figure out quickly how to cruise the area. Other cats may need to follow a trail of treats or a wand toy as enticement. Very shy or introverted cats may just take a bit longer to embrace the change. It is vital that your clients understand this need and don’t create a negative association in the rush to get their cat using the kitty highway.

**Cat Friendly Environments Are Good for Every Cat-Dog Household**

Many clients think declawing will help their cat-dog relationship challenges, and don’t understand that it could actually make things a lot worse. As professionals, we need to understand the psychology behind declawing in order to prevent unnecessary procedures and design a behavior modification plan that our clients will embrace. The ideas and concepts in this article are not meant as a solution to all problem behaviors between cats and dogs, but rather are intended to provide an approach incorporating environmental modifications that can reduce stress and conflict in the house. All cats, particularly those without claws, will appreciate the added safety measures inherent in a cat-friendly house. These accommodations are employed in addition to behavior modification techniques that teach the cat and dog to cohabit without conflict. Unfortunately, in the real world there are also cats and dogs who either will not adapt to an interspecies household or have human guardians who are not able to conduct appropriate cat-dog relationship-building exercises. These animals are serious threats to each other, and you may have to find other solutions, such as re-homing one or permanently separating the two. However, the majority of your cat-dog households can benefit from the ideas in this article, and at the same time you can help keep cat toes where they belong!

**Resources**

Understanding declawing:
- [www.littlebigcat.com/?s=declaw](http://www.littlebigcat.com/?s=declaw)

Video of some common signs that a cat with partial-toe amputations needs medical intervention: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=sFlkvZ2aAY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sFlkvZ2aAY)


Jacqueline Munera, CCBC, PCBC, CAP2, is an IAABC CCBC and is co-instructor of the Companion Animal Sciences Institute’s Diploma of Feline Behavior program. As owner of Positive Cattitudes in Tampa, FL, she coaches human clients on how to live in harmony with their cats and dogs, while encouraging people to push the boundaries of what they think cats are capable of. Jacqueline presents internationally on a variety of cat training and behavior topics and has published multiple cat related articles. Jacqueline and Jazzmanda are the first human-cat team in the world to pass level 2 of Kay Laurence’s challenging test of clicker training skills, the Competency Assessment Programme (CAP). You can contact her or see some of her cat training and behavior videos at [www.PositiveCattitudes.com](http://www.positivecattitudes.com).