

B-21 PROTOCOL OR REDIRECTED AGGRESSION IN CATS (AND DOGS)

Redirected aggression is more common in cats than it is in dogs. This protocol is written primarily with cats in mind, but it can be easily adapted to dogs by applying the same principles and guidelines.

Redirected aggression can be difficult to diagnose because the circumstances that precipitate it are not often witnessed. Accordingly, the people who are watching the redirected event, unless it is directed toward them, think that the primary problem is interanimal (interdog or intercat) aggression. Redirected aggression is potentially a very dangerous problem; the recipient of the aggression seldom anticipates it and is usually traumatized by the aggression because it appears so out of context to them.

The classic example of redirected aggression involves two cats that are sitting in a window. Unknown to one of the cats, the other sees another cat outside. Because that cat cannot have access to the one that is outside and is agitated by that, the cat redirects its aggression toward its housemate. This behavior involves both an aggressive response that is related to the social system *and*—this is very important—frustration at not being able to resolve the perceived social conflict. Another example of redirected aggression involves the dog that is chasing the cat. A person stops the dog from chasing the cat and the dog redirects its aggression to the person. In such cases, when there are no physical barriers that thwart the continuation of the aggression, it is very important to distinguish true redirected aggression from an accidental bite. An accidental bite is one that occurs to persons or animals simply because they found themselves between fighting animals. In these cases the animal generally releases the person as soon as it realizes that it made a mistake. In redirected aggression the animal acts as if it is angry at the person or animal who interrupted it and pursues the new victim of its aggression.

Unfortunately, redirected aggression can be so contextually inappropriate, so unexpected, and so traumatic that the recipient of the aggression becomes instantly and intensely fearful of the aggressor. This aggression can change the entire social hierarchy in the household and cause the victim to hide and become withdrawn. If the aggressor has had a problem with the victim in the past, this provides a good opportunity to further victimize that cat. Full-blown interact aggression can then develop. If the recipient of the redirected aggression fights back, fighting back can either start or exaggerate an already existent cycle of intercat aggression.

It is not necessary that the aggressor continue to be aggressive for the victim to be fearful. The context is so inappropriate that a recipient can learn to be fearful on the basis of *one* exposure. Similarly, after only one experience the aggressor may learn to associate its inability to pursue an individual or circumstance in which it was initially thwarted with the presence of the housemate. For example, every time the aggressor sees the housemate, regardless of whether the outdoor cat is present, it experiences the same full-blown set of behaviors as when the initial event occurred. No wonder the feline housemate now hides from the aggressor.

Treatment of redirected aggression is very difficult. In ad-

dition to the checklist below, you need to use all of the relevant procedures in "Protocol for Cats With Intercat Aggression" or "Protocol for Dogs With Interdog Aggression." Caution is critically important. These animals are not acting normally and can injure another individual.

Checklist

- 1. Identify the primary source of the animal's initial upset. If the cats sit in the window, look outside for signs of an intruder cat (e.g., smells of urine, buried feces, paw prints, spraying against the window, or nose prints on the glass). Do anything you can to prevent the circumstances in which the initial aggression occurred from reoccurring (put a lace curtain in the window or ask your neighbors to keep their cat indoors). If you know that the aggression has happened when the dog was corrected for chasing the cat, separate them so that the chase cannot happen. Try to ensure that the precipitating stimulus is eliminated from the behavioral environment.
- 2. Separate the individuals involved in the redirected aggression when not supervised. Make sure that the victim or recipient of the aggression has the most freedom to roam or to select a preferred resting spot.
- 3. Reward the aggressor for ignoring the victim by praising it or using food treats.
- 4. Make sure that the victim has all the attention first and that each cat or dog gets 5 to 10 minutes of individual, calming attention (grooming or massage) alone each day.
- 5. Adhere to instructions in the "Protocol for the Introduction of a New Pet to Other Household Pets." Start as if these two pets have never known each other.
- 6. Put a bell on the aggressor and observe it closely. Startle the aggressor at the first signs of any aggression, including staring. If the aggressor's mere presence seems to frighten the victim or recipient of the aggression, banish the aggressor. Try to ensure that the recipient sees you do this.
- 7. Particularly for cats, redirected aggression is so horrific that each of the cats requires antianxiety medication. The medications chosen for each cat are usually different because the desired effects are different (rendering one cat less fearful while rendering the other less reactive and aggressive). Remember, these medications are adjuvants to, not substitutions for, behavioral and environmental modification.
- 8. If nothing works after months of effort and compliance, consider placing one of the animals in another home. This is a difficult condition to treat, it may have a high relapse rate, and it may be safer to place one of the animals. Because the problem involves a specific complex circumstance, finding new homes is a good option because it totally alters the circumstance.
- 9. If the patient involved in the redirected aggression is a dog, remember that canine redirected aggression can be associated with dominance aggression. Ensure that this is not also a problem, and if it is, treat it.

gressive cat in a way that makes sense within a feline social system.

- 7. Make sure that your cat has its claws trimmed and kept short. If your cat uses a scratching post covered with sandpaper, this is very easy. Regardless, provide your cat with something besides you to scratch. Logs, scratching posts, and tree branches can be useful.
- 8. If your cat persists in its aggressive play, banish it to another room. When the cat is calm, let the cat out and repeat the above instructions. Most play is about attention—eventually this will work.
- 9. If anyone is injured by the cat, seek immediate competent medical help.