

Ep #94: Sleep Training Your Pets: Yes, It's a Thing



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Devon Clement

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We've talked about sleep training your baby, we've talked about sleep training your older kids, we've talked about sleep training yourselves. Today, we're going to talk about sleep training that other family member: your pets.

Welcome to *Parenthood Prep*, the only show that helps sleep-deprived parents and overwhelmed parents-to-be to successfully navigate those all-important early years with their baby, toddler, and child. If you are ready to provide the best care for your newborn, manage those toddler tantrums, and grow with your child, you're in the right place. Now here's your host, baby and parenting expert, Devon Clement.

Hello, and welcome back to *Parenthood Prep*, the podcast that prepares you for parenthood. Today, we are doing a little bit of a departure from our normal topics of babies and families and pregnancy and having kids and talking about a slightly different type of parenting. And that is pet parenting. You know, a lot of people have what I call their first baby, and a lot of the principles that we are applying in sleep training babies, getting into routines and schedules, and things like that can also work really well for yourself and for your pets.

And I was chatting with a friend yesterday evening. She was visiting from out of town, and she was telling me that she and her partner had adopted a cat, and they were having some issues with the cat waking up super early in the morning and wanting to be fed and like nibbling on their chins. And it was leading to arguments and fights between them because the cat was, you know, waking everybody up demanding food super early in the morning, and nobody enjoyed that, and they didn't really know what to do. And so I was like, "Actually, this is very fixable, and I can tell you exactly what to do because I have sleep-trained my cats multiple times in addition to sleep-training babies."

And, you know, when I say multiple times, it's kind of like sometimes you have to re-sleep-train your kid a little bit. Sometimes you have to re-sleep-train yourself a little bit because you kind of slip into some bad routines, or you move, or you travel. So anyway, sometimes you just have to make some changes. So here is my advice about sleep-training your pets.

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And it's very similar to babies. The good news is, I think you get a little bit less emotional about their feelings. I mean, we're still, you know, caring about them and feeling connected to them, but it's not the same like biological, you know, alarm bells going off in our brains because our cat is crying outside the door. And it's very simple, and if you stick to it, it can be very quick. It is not going to be, you know, super smooth and easy. There's going to be a little bit of difficulty that you have to deal with.

So the biggest issue with pets is that they generally will wake up very early in the morning, sometimes in the middle of the night. And if you're feeding them on a schedule and you don't just have like food out for them all the time, they will want to be fed. You know, the earlier they wake up, the more they will want to be fed. And cats, particularly, they're not nocturnal, which means they're up at night and they sleep during the day. They're not diurnal, which means they're up during the day and they sleep at night.

They're something that's called crepuscular. It's a trivia word right there. It actually was a question at our trivia night, and I knew it because of cats. Crepuscular. And what that means is that they are awake at, like, most active awake at dawn and dusk, and they sleep in the middle of the day and the middle of the night. And anyone who's ever had a cat knows they get those like 4 AM zoomies, and that's them being crepuscular, so which also leads to them, you know, nibbling on your face at 5 AM to get fed.

So the simple way to get around this is just don't feed them at that hour. Just don't. Don't let them get into your bed and nibble on your face. If you don't want to kick them out of your room for the whole night, which I don't, I like having my cat sleep in bed with me, but when we're going through a phase where I'm needing to sleep-train them, they get kicked out of the room at 4 AM when they get annoying. And I, fortunately, am able to easily go back to sleep, so that's fine for me. I can just throw them into the hallway, shut the door, and that's it. Do they scratch at the door? Do they meow? Yes. If you are worried about what they're going to do, you know, are they going to scratch the door? Get ahead of yourself. Be proactive.

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I say this to parents. Like a lot of times, parents are reluctant to sleep-train their baby if they have an older one because they don't want the crying to wake the older one up, and then everybody's miserable and the parents are waking up a million times a night. I'm like, get ahead of things, be proactive. Either send the older one to Grandma's house for the night, have them have a sleepover in the basement, have them, you know, if the kids are in the same room or the goal is to get the kids in the same room, bring the big one to your room for a few nights and have a sleepover on like a little air mattress or a little nest of blankets on the floor in your room while the baby is sleep-training. Sometimes you just need to have a talk with your older kid.

Anyway, you can't do that with your pets. So if you're like, "Oh my God, but they're going to scratch my door, and then my door is going to get scratches on it," tape up some moving blankets. Get like a sheet of, I have these plastic walls that I use to make pens for the kittens, like put some of those in front of the door, or like put up a baby gate. Like just think about what your objections are and get ahead of them. So now it's like 4 AM, they're bothering you, do not give in to them. Just don't do it. Put them outside.

Another thing you can do to grease the wheels, to make the process a little easier, is feed them like last thing before you go to sleep. So like as late as humanly possible, like midnight or whatever time you go to sleep, put out some food for them at that time. Even if it's not the ultimate schedule you want, it will help them to be a little less hungry when they wake up in the morning. So like with a baby, we would call that a dream feed, where you're picking them up out of the crib when they're asleep and giving them a feed at like 10 or 11 before you go to bed so that their long stretch of sleep lines up better with your long stretch of sleep, ideally.

So you're essentially giving your pets a dream feed, and then you're either kicking them out of the room for the night or, as soon as they start bothering you, they get kicked out of the room. We see this. We have to sleep-train our foster kittens all the time because once they, you know they start out in a pen, they start out contained. But when they get bigger and they're more like on the loose,

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either in our bedroom or just loose in the house, then they start bothering us at that hour.

And it's not always because they want food, because I really don't, unless they're teeny-tiny, bottle-fed babies, I don't get in a routine of feeding them super early in the morning because I'm not an early riser and I don't want them to expect that. But they might just want to play or just be like running around. Like a couple of weeks ago, a kitten just literally ran across my face at 4 AM. I was like, "Okay, that's it. You guys are going in jail. You are getting put in the bathroom or back in the pen or in the big closet."

Like, do not be afraid to contain them so that they can't bother you. But with a cat, a dog, you don't necessarily want to pen them or crate them when they're older. So just kicking them out of your room and not responding. They will put up a fight, especially if you've been responding at that hour. They will put up a fight, but you need to just let them work it out. You need to just let them be. I will feed you when I get up, you know, same time every day. It's good for them to have a routine, but that time does not have to be 4 or 5 in the morning if you don't want to feed them at that time.

I am not a vet. I am not talking to you about how you should or shouldn't be feeding your pets, if you should let them have food all the time, or if they should graze or whatever. I'm just saying when they're fed on a schedule, you can set that schedule to be whatever works for you. And for me, like I said, I'm a night owl, so I want to feed them at like 1 in the morning and then again at 9 AM when I'm up and ready to face the day.

A story I like to tell is that when I was in college, this family I babysat for was going away one weekend, and they asked me to watch their dogs. So I stayed at their house, and I was watching their dogs. And before they left, they had older kids who were like in school and they had a baby, so everybody was up early, before they left, the mom was like, "Oh, Dev, I know you like to sleep in, you're a college student, but these dogs are up at 7 AM. You're going to have to be letting them out in the yard at 7. Sorry." I'm like, "That's fine. This is my job. This

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is what I'm here to do. I'll let them out in the yard, let them back in, and go back to sleep. It's fine."

Because that was their routine. The whole family got up, the big kids got ready for school, the dogs went out, whatever. And sure enough, that first Saturday morning or whatever of the dog sitting, both the dogs slept in the bed with me. I woke up at college student time, maybe 10 or 11 AM. Both dogs were snoring away in the bed with me. They did not try to wake me up at 7. They had no interest in going out at that hour because the whole house wasn't awake, alert, running around, getting ready for school and stuff, saying, "Yeah, let's go, it's time to get up." We were just sleeping, and they just totally fed into those cues.

So yes, they just had food all the time, which I know is not a normal thing for dogs, but that's why they weren't waking me up because they were hungry, but they were not waking me up to get let out. And if your dog is doing that, maybe don't feed them right before bed because then they're going to have to poop at 4 in the morning.

But when they are asking for those things, you can also give them an alternative. I mean, if it's a big dog, it's not ideal, but if it's a little dog, you just want to think through what the issue is that's bothering you and how can I fix this? So I have a small to medium-sized dog. They really have to pee at 4 in the morning, and it's really annoying to get up and let them out and let them back in or even take them for a walk. Train them to use one of those little pad areas, and then you can just clean it up when you get up.

Think about what the problem is that's keeping you from solving the problem. Like, "I don't want them scratching the door." Put something on the door so that they can't scratch the finish of the door. You can't stop them from protesting, you know, howling, scratching, meowing, barking, all that. But after a few nights, not that many, three, five, maybe a week, they will stop doing that because they will realize that they are not getting a response to their protests and their demands to be fed. They will not starve to death. Your baby will not starve to death. Neither will your pet.

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So that is how to sleep-train your pets. I know it's a little different from what we usually talk about, but is it really? Or is it basically the same stuff I say all the time? Be consistent, be proactive, and don't feel like problems are unsolvable just because you haven't been able to figure it out yet.

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Thanks for listening to this week's episode of *Parenthood Prep*. If you want to learn more about the services Devon offers, as well as access her free monthly newborn care webinars, head on over to www.HappyFamilyAfter.com.