

How Clara Belle Got Her House Back

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In a blog last year you got to know little Simon, who is my cream and orange tabby with virtual angel wings. The One-Who-Could-Do-No-Wrong, whose easygoing nature charmed and won over my older, more complex and less social tuxedo girl, Clara Belle. This summer a most interesting situation developed between the two cats. It is one that often occurs under the human radar in many cat homes, even mine!

At the beginning of this year Simon turned two and a half, a time which marks the end of adolescence and full entry into the cat adult world. He and Clara Belle, who is six years old, had stopped play wrestling and I noticed a gradual shift in the dynamics. She considered him a full grown male cat and interpreted his “play” with less humor (she didn’t have much to begin with). The usual chasing games became more intense, with Simon “playfully” invading her space. All she would do to show her annoyance was give him a hollow hiss. Their behavior shift continued in the evening when we all went to bed. Clara Belle started to hiss as soon as Simon jumped on the bed. Eventually, with my arbitration, each one found an acceptable personal spot on their claimed side, with me in the middle. For a while everything seemed to fall into an uneasy peace. Clara Belle is difficult and intolerant and I’ve always been grateful for Simon’s good nature. For that reason, I missed his transition to little mischievous cat man. Moreover, like a lot of people, I made the mistake of thinking that the cats would sort out their new dynamics and that Clara Belle would

be able to stand up for herself. In most cases they can't and things go from bad to worse. Usually, I am the first to point that out to my kitty clients.

My awakening started at some point a few months ago, when I noticed Clara Belle spending a lot of time in the kitchen. She seemed to like it there and alternated from a cushy bench by the table nook to a cardboard box lined with paper on the floor below the kitchen table. In the evening, she stayed there while Simon walked to my bedroom and jumped on my bed. He gave me the most soulful, "Isn't this the BEST" gaze as he settled by my side for the night. Clara Belle no longer came to bed, not even to wake me up in the morning. She seldom ventured beyond her kitchen space, even declining to visit her usual special spots at different windows. That is little wonder, because as soon as she ventured to one of them, Simon would come up to her and his close proximity would cause her to jump off in a huff of hissing indignation. I did see Simon moving in on Clara Belle but nothing I did, including shooing Simon away, made her want to stay and insist upon claiming her place. More and more she retreated to her safe spots in the kitchen. Simon, most casually and nonchalantly, had taken to laying on a rug by the entryway to the kitchen ~ a strategic position indeed. If Simon wasn't posted there, she would occasionally leave the kitchen to go to the cat scratcher by the front door. He invariably kept track of her movements and would come to stalk her as she returned to the kitchen from the cat scratcher. Also, he would frequently sit on the kitchen table and stare down at her, whether she was on the bench or in the cat bed below. Staring down from a higher place is another way to intimidate and she was very bothered by it. I'd observe him or hear the hissing and would immediately put a stop to whatever he was doing, but that didn't faze him. He was focused on keeping Clara Belle in her place and was having a great time doing it.

Empowered by his free rein, Simon came and went as he pleased, and loved on me a lot, while she stayed in those same spots in the kitchen. I still didn't completely "get it" until it occurred to me that Clara Belle wasn't just being difficult and intolerant of Simon. She really appeared boxed in. Then the light bulb went off in my head and I adjusted my perception about what that little monkey Simon had achieved. I asked myself how could I, of all people, have missed this? I was so sorry and appalled. As I went back and reviewed Simon's behavior, it became clear that he had figured out how easy it was to push Clara Belle around. He had been behaving this way for about eight weeks and it had given him plenty of time to hone his game.

When he was younger, he had chased her in play and she responded positively. (They do get along. This isn't an incompatibility issue.) As he got older, and at some point during the back and forth chase/running, the intensity of his pursuit increased. She got annoyed, flustered and didn't know how to keep him from going too far in his game. Her response to him was a hollow sounding, ineffective hissing. On many occasions it happened around four in the morning and I wasn't inclined to get up and halt Simon's behavior. Therefore, Simon carried on. He was effortlessly displacing her from a distance of several feet when she yielded the window spot as soon as he showed up. That is how and when, as an adult male, Simon learned he could have an upper hand and grow his power over her. Displacement is significant body language in the animal world. An animal who yields his place to another is sending a clear message of submission. I remember being so amused when a friend's big and powerful Bernese Mountain dog sat down and leaned on me as I was down on my knee to take a photo. He continued to gently increase his pressure until I lost my balance and I fell away from him. He then sat in the place I

had just vacated, and if I tried to push him back, he didn't budge. This happened over and over in all sorts of situations and with different people. He'd lean on you and make you move. A displacement of a few of inches was enough to make his point. At the time we all thought his behavior was just ever so cute. Little did we know the joke was on us! He gently, but purposefully, displaced us and, from his perspective, became "the boss of us". In the same way, Simon never ceased to look like my little sweet angel boy cat until I interpreted his new behavior correctly.

I had initially worked so hard at getting Clara Belle socialized. She had made tremendous progress in learning how to be comfortable and how to behave in a home. I was determined not to let her regress.

Simon had gradually lost more and more respect for Clara Belle's senior, number one, first arrived position in our household. I would have to help her get that back and knew how to accomplish it.

The first step was to address him directly and tell him I expected him to respect her. Every time I observed him doing something disrespectful, such as chasing her, intimidating her with his stare, or moving into her space, I'd put an end to it by telling him firmly to stop. If I saw him contemplating doing something, I'd just divert his attention elsewhere. Clara Belle would look at me with relief that I was helping her out. Little by little, Clara Belle started to trust that I was being consistent in enforcing the new rules and her behavior had been vindicated. She began venturing out of the kitchen for quick visits into the living room, but would soon dart back to the kitchen. I would firmly repeat the rules, but

Simon would give me a defiant look and continue his behavior. Clearly, from his point of view, I was an unwelcome intruder into his cat affairs and, in true cat spirit, he didn't see any good feline reason why he should comply with my wishes. This went on for several days, until the opportunity to drive the point home with Simon presented itself one morning as I came out of my bedroom. Clara Belle had left her kitchen area and Simon was just starting to stalk and chase her. I came at him, waving a piece of clothing I happened to have in one hand. The message this time was physical as well as vocal. This intimidating physical move into his space startled him and he ran away. I pursued him a bit more and he ran under a bed. I was really sorry I had to do this, but it was the turning point. He tried stalking her another few times and each time had to deal with me waving a dishtowel or whatever I could wave in his direction. The day I pursued Simon under the guest bed, Clara Belle ventured all the way to my bedroom in the evening. She took her place on the bed and gave me repeated cat hugs during the first night. Both of us had missed the other. Simon acted subdued and a bit sad. I made sure he knew I loved him and treasured him, but he was to respect Clara Belle. I remained very consistent in my mindset. There is no room in this situation for being absent minded or too busy, because the domineering cat will take advantage of any opportunity to go back to their intimidating behaviors. Once or twice I carried Clara Belle and put her on the bed when I went to bed. During the day, I would find Simon in the cat bed in the kitchen when clearly Clara Belle wanted to use it. I would gently but firmly pick him up and displace him to the living room so Clara Belle could take over the cat bed. The first time I displaced him like that he looked crestfallen, but it sealed Clara Belle's #1 position over his. Clara Belle started to freely move around the house and jump up on her favorite places. She even shooed him off the bed once or twice. Impressive!

This process of implementing appropriate boundaries and restoring a more harmonious interaction between the two cats took three weeks ~ twenty one days and nights of constant attention. More than once during that time, I got up at three or four in the morning when I heard something going on, usually Clara Belle hissing, and made Simon stop whatever he was doing. He still tries to chase Clara Belle but, because she is more confident, it is more in play than intimidation. I still stop him and display displeasure. He responds immediately and runs to one of his spots and lies down looking contrite. He knows. Now, they both come to bed and find a spot, but I have pushed Simon off once or twice when he was staring down Clara Belle. After a while, he returns with the right attitude and everyone is at peace.

Yesterday, I observed her play wrestle him while he was lying in the sunshine by the back door. She managed to bother him enough that he got up and left. I gave her an imaginary kitty high-five and she blinked a cat kiss in return. We have a happy, harmonious home once again.



Clara Belle's heart

