

Setting boundaries is not just for moggies

By Ruth Ostrow

IT was a hot, hot Saturday. We all awoke in a cranky mood, probably dehydrated from sweating in our sleep, or as a friend announced after three days of heat wave: what sleep?

Despite feeling like isolating myself in a refrigerator, I had volunteered to help a girlfriend out and look after her daughter. I had also decided to do something out of character.

In the pet shop buying food for my cat, I noticed a moggie sitting in a cage. It had been there for months getting so big it hardly fitted in the confined space. The heat in the shop was unbearable.

"I'll take him with me for the weekend," I said to the shop owner, whom I know. "If there isn't blood spilt between him and my cat, I'll give him a home."

So there we all were – cats, kids and I. It started first in the lounge room. The kitten wandered in while my cat was eating. The hissing and low feline growling was audible from the other side of the house. In the bedroom it was erupting too: "I said don't touch that. Give it back; stop it . . . It's mine!" as the kids began squabbling over a toy.

Into the lounge I darted to separate the cats, then into the bedroom to placate the kids, then back into the laundry to release the crying kitten, then back into the bedroom to yell at the kids: "Cut it out. What's this about, can't you share?"

Finally I sat back and thought about what was happening. The wars were ultimately about the same thing: boundaries.

Boundary-setting, as the cats tried to establish who was first and who was second in command, boundary violation as my daughter's friend was trying to take control of a doll, boundary redefining, as I tried to let everyone know I was past my limits.

The fact is that although defining and setting boundaries is deeply uncomfortable, it is actually one of the healthiest things we can do, according to renowned psychologist Dr Harriet G. Lerner in her classic book *The Dance of Anger* .

People are generally terrified of tiffs, arguments with friends and lovers, or feel disturbed watching kids battle each other. But animals teach us that boundary setting is one of the fundamental laws of nature, and a good one at that.

Lerner maintains that anger is a form of defining our limits, what we can and what we can't tolerate, and if we use it as a barometer rather than a weapon it can be a powerful survival tool.

My cats are not wanting to harm each other. They're just establishing a pecking order which makes things clear and clean. They are marking territory. For instance, my older cat is very relaxed sharing the lounge room, but go near his cat bowl and there are blood-curdling shrieks.

Despite New Age optimism, we are no different. We need some control over our fragile environs. In my years as a sex and relationships writer and broadcaster I

noted that most relationship spats were about boundary limits, violations and negotiating territory.

"He" was okay with her having a chat with a male friend at a party, but when they started dancing he pounced. "She" was okay with him reading while she tried to sleep, but when he pulled too much of the doona towards his side, she snapped.

Toilet seats, remote controls and toothpaste are well-known battle grounds, and speak of the eternal battle we all have in trying to mark out our terrain.

But boundary-setting is ultimately about mutual respect. By establishing our emotional, physical, and sexual limits, we are creating a safe space for ourselves. Which usually results in us feeling more relaxed and respectful about another person's safe space.

Cats and kids show us how it's done. Firstly it's crucial to identify our own wounds, what makes us hiss, what hurts, where it is that we cannot go. You don't have to justify yourself if you get jealous or don't like to share the TV remote – merely express it. Because it's not bad or good, just true.

Once boundaries are set, partners and friends can either accept them as reasonable or try to negotiate with us. No one has to agree with our borders, and we in turn can always choose to compromise. But at least everyone knows where they stand, which is a very healthy way to live.

Finally, watching animals has taught me that we have to police our own borders and not expect others to be psychic. Without having certain wounds or needs ourselves we all tend to be insensitive to other people's idiosyncrasies – until hissed at.

If we can get it together in our own homes, who knows? Eventually world peace? For now I'm happy that the kids are quiet in front of the television and the cats are asleep.

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