

# Training Cats with Positive Reinforcement

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Training your cat has important benefits. You're stimulating his body and his mind, which helps keep him healthy. And spending time together means you're strengthening the bond you share. It's helpful to work with behaviors that are less than desirable and you can also teach fun tricks like wave and fetch, or teach him a range of useful behaviors like sit, stay and to come when called.

## Reward behaviors that you want

Simply put, if you want your cat to repeat a behavior, reward that behavior. It's important to make sure that you're rewarding the behavior you want and not accidentally rewarding an unwanted behavior. For example: when your cat meows at you, do you talk back to her or give her a treat? This is serving to teach her that if she meows at you, she gets a treat. If you don't reward his meowing—in other words, ignore him when he meows—he's unlikely to become a meower. If you really like a quiet cat, reward him when he's not meowing.

## Use rewards to teach new behavior

If you'd like your cat to come to you when you call try this: Call her name and reward her with a treat when she walks over to you; then move to another spot, call her name, and reward her when she responds, and so on.

## Provide the right motivation

Motivation is the key to training. For most cats, it's food. They care less about "good kitty" than about good kitty treats. Finding something that is of high value to your cat will be the most important factor when you begin to work with your cat. Some cats love treats, some prefer a small amount of wet food on a spoon, some love tuna. It can take some trial and error, but finding the right treat can really influence the success of your training.

So to motivate your cat, you're going to reward her with a treat every time she uses the scratching post, lets you brush her, plays nicely with you or another animal or allows you to trim her nails. Scratch her head and tell her she's a pretty girl at the same time, but make sure you give her that treat.

Smart cats will soon link that behavior with getting treats.

## Reward immediately

Timing is everything in training your cat. Cats have short attention spans, so the reward must come immediately (within seconds) of the behavior or your cat may not know what it's for.

For example, if you see her use the scratching post, throw some treats her way while she's scratching and tell her she's a good cat, but don't throw the treats if she has stopped scratching and is starting to something else, or it's that "something else" that she'll think merits the reward.

## **Reward consistently**

This is an important part of training. Give the same kind of reward each time your cat behaves the way you want him to, and make sure everyone in the family does the same.

## **Train at the right time**

The best time to train is right before meal time when your cat is most motivated by food. Only train for short periods at a time (15 minutes max) or your cat may lose interest. As soon as she stops responding, stop training.

## **(Eventually) trade in the treats**

Because too many treats lead to a fat cat, your goal is to gradually wean her off the food rewards and make her settle for emotional ones such as a "good kitty," a toss of her fuzzy ball, or a scratch under the chin.

Once your cat is displaying the desired behavior reliably, you can start cutting back on food. Give her treats three out of every four times she does the behavior, then reduce it to about half the time, then about a third of the time and so on, until you're only rewarding her occasionally with a treat.

Continue the praise and non-food rewards. Your cat will learn that if she keeps offering desired behaviors, eventually she'll get what she wants—your praise and an occasional treat.

## **See if training will ease stressful situations**

Providing a reward can help calm your cat during procedures she may not otherwise like, such as nail trims, brushing, going into the carrier, or being picked up. But for some cats, discomfort outweighs the joy of eating, so don't be too disappointed if the technique doesn't come through for you.

## **What not to do:**

### **Never punish**

You may be sorely tempted to yell at your cat if you catch her sitting next to a broken vase or clawing the furniture, but punishing your cat after the fact is ineffective. She won't connect the punishment with something she's already done and forgotten about. Instead, she'll think you're yelling at her for whatever she's doing at that very moment, which might be welcoming you home from work.

Yelling, hitting, and shaking will only make your cat fearful and confused and could lead to her avoiding you altogether.

### **Don't force your cat**

Don't pick your cat up and take her to the scratching post or litter box to get her to use them. She won't understand what you're doing, and she'll probably be frightened.

### **Don't turn your cat into a beggar**

Use treats only for training. If you give your cat a treat every time she paws you, she'll quickly learn that pawing = treat, and she'll never leave you alone.