



Training Your Cat Using Positive Reinforcement Methods

The first step with any behavioral issue is to take your cat to the veterinarian for a full evaluation. Cats are very stoic animals and will hide illness and injury. Sometimes our only clue that something is physically wrong is a behavioral symptom. Many behavioral modification programs can begin in conjunction with or shortly after your trip to the veterinarian.

Positive reinforcement is giving something of value to the cat as a direct result of desirable behavior. Cats learn by trial and error. They perform a behavior and then evaluate the results. If the behavior successfully gets them what they want they will continue the behavior in the future. If the behavior does not get them what they want they will eventually quit performing that behavior. By using positive reinforcement methods, we are communicating more effectively with our cats and they will learn faster.

Every interaction is a training session whether you mean it to be or not. If your cat meows and you answer her right away every time she learns that if she wants your attention she needs to meow. If your cat meows and you leave the room without a word or even a glance she learns that when she meows it makes you go away. Using positive reinforcement will help you shape a variety of behaviors in your cat if you learn how to be consistent and reward at the precise moment the desired behavior occurs.

The reward for appropriate behaviors can include treats, praise, petting or a play session. Find out what your cat enjoys the most and use that reward for teaching new behaviors and reinforcing the behaviors that are most important to you. When you are training a new behavior it is recommended that you reward every time that behavior occurs. When the cat is performing the behavior consistently you can gradually switch to intermittently rewarding. For example, every third or fourth time she performs the behavior. There may be some behaviors that you want to reward every time because you value that behavior. For example, every time the cat uses the scratching post you can praise her and occasionally you also can give her a treat as she is scratching. This will reinforce the learned behavior and your cat's association with scratching on the scratching post with positive attention will not fade. *See also the article on destructive scratching.*

It is crucial that you time the rewards precisely or you may accidentally reinforce the wrong behavior. Let's consider the example of training your cat to sit to receive a meal. You can begin by standing with the cat's full bowl in your hand. Watch and wait until your cat sits down. The exact moment her butt touches the floor you say "yes!" and lean over to deliver her bowl. This is correct timing. Now imagine that your cat sits and you begin to lean over to deliver the dish; but as you are leaning over she stands up and walks towards you. She has just received food for standing up and walking towards you and has

made no association with sitting for her meal. What you should have done is stand back up and wait for the cat to sit again. This time say “yes!” and deliver the bowl quickly while she is still sitting.

Consistency is also very important when training behaviors. Discuss with the entire household the behaviors you are training with the cat. It will confuse the cat if certain members of the family feed her when she is standing and other members of the family wait until she is sitting. Likewise, she will be equally confused if she receives conflicting information from an individual. Be sure the behavior you are shaping is one that you will consistently reward.

In the training world, punishment is meant to reduce the chance of a behavior occurring in the future. If used incorrectly, punishment could damage your relationship with your cat permanently. To be used correctly, punishment must occur at the exact moment the unwanted behavior occurs. Owners are usually unsuccessful at teaching cats to stay off the counter by yelling or spraying the cat with water. What the cat is actually learning is that her owner gets angry and inflicts harm. While the cat may associate not getting on the counter when the owner is home, it is quite likely that when the owner is away the cat will get on the counter. Your cat should NEVER receive this type of punishment from you. *See also the article on Using Aversive Conditioning.* Cats do not act out of spite or revenge and they don't have a sense of right and wrong. Using punishment that causes fear, discomfort or pain may cause your cat to become defensive and scratch or bite.

The method of punishment you can use involves taking things away from your cat. Primarily you will be taking away attention or the opportunity for a treat. For example, if your cat is using your hand as a chew toy you take away the opportunity of play by freezing your hand and walking away from the cat. The cat has associated biting your hand with you ending the play session. *See also the article on Managing Rough Play.* The most important thing to remember about using punishment is that you should be pairing it with a positive reinforcement. Withdraw your attention while the undesirable behavior is occurring and give attention when the desirable behavior occurs. It is more effective to reward for behaviors you want to encourage. By doing this you are telling your cat the things you like instead of telling her what you don't like.

If you have been using forms of punishment that scare, cause discomfort or pain you need to take steps to restore your relationship with your cat. Begin interactive play sessions and scheduled feeding as soon as possible. Remember that broken trust can be difficult to repair so take things slowly and only use positive reinforcement methods.

If after trying these suggestions you are still experiencing undesirable behaviors in your cat, SUBMIT QUESTIONS by clicking the link under Ask A Trainer on the Behavior and Training page of the Wayside Waifs website: www.waysidewaifs.org.