



Positive Reinforcement: Training Your Cat

You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. That's the theory behind positive reinforcement. Don't punish your cat for unwanted behavior; instead, reward them for doing something you like. With encouragement and plenty of treats, you and your cat can accomplish great things.

What to do

Reward behaviors you like

It's pretty simple: If you want your cat to repeat a behavior, reward that behavior.

Things get a little more complicated when people unwittingly reward a behavior that they don't really want to encourage.

For example, when your cat talks to you, do you talk to him, pet him, or give him a treat? If so, you're teaching your cat that meowing brings rewards. 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.

So to motivate your cats, you're going to reward them with a treat every time they use the scratching post, let you brush them, or use the litterbox appropriately. Scratch their heads and tell them they're a pretty cat at the same time, but make sure you give them 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 them use the scratching post, throw some treats their way while they're scratching and tell them they're a good cat, but don't throw the treats if they have stopped scratching and are starting to do something else, or it's that "something else" that they'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 her 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 cats are most motivated by food. Only train for short periods at a time (15 minutes max) or your cats may lose interest. As soon as they stop responding, stop training.

(Eventually) trade in the treats

Because too many treats lead to a fat cat, your goal is to gradually wean them off the food rewards and make them settle for emotional ones such as a "good kitty," a toss of their 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 they do 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 them occasionally with a treat.

Continue the praise and non-food rewards. Your cats will learn that if they keep offering desired behaviors, eventually they'll get what they want—your praise and an occasional treat.

See if training will ease stressful situations

Providing a reward can help calm your cat during procedures they 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 him sitting next to a broken vase or clawing the furniture, but punishing your cat after the fact is ineffective. He won't connect the punishment with something he's already done and forgotten about. Instead, he'll think you're yelling at him for whatever he's doing at that very moment, which might be welcoming you home from work.

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

Don't force your cat

Don't pick your cats up and take them to the scratching post or litter box to get them to use them. They won't understand what you're doing, and they'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 they paw you, they'll quickly learn that pawing = treat, and they'll never leave you alone.

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About Napa Humane

The Humane Society of Napa County and SPCA, known as Napa Humane, is a non-profit organization incorporated in 1973. Recognizing that companion animals are an important part of healthy communities, we've grown to consider Napa Humane a community service organization. Our programs and services are designed to address the needs of animals – and also to provide support, education, and assistance for all the people who care for and about them.

Napa Humane is a private and independent organization that is supported by private donations by individuals and businesses, bequests, and fees for service. We receive no government funding, tax dollars or funding from national animal welfare organizations.

Our Mission

To promote the welfare of companion animals through protection, advocacy, education, and by example.