



## Training your cat

Most people believe that cats can't be trained because cats don't seem to respond to many of the methods used to train dogs. But cats do respond to training! In fact, one of the first scientific studies highlighting the reinforcement in animal behavior was done in cats.

The first step to training your cat is to understand him. Cats aren't as social as dogs. Dogs have been bred specifically to work together with people, whereas the primary reason cats were domesticated was to kill vermin on their own. They're independent and they aren't as naturally inclined to work for praise and attention as dogs are. They're also not as easy to motivate. You have to use really special treats that your cat finds irresistible. Training a cat requires some creativity and patience.

Training your cat has important benefits. You're stimulating his body and mind, which helps keep him healthy. Spending time together means you're strengthening the bond you both share. In addition to teaching him fun tricks like wave and fetch, you can also teach him a range of useful behaviors like sit, stay and to come when called. You could even teach your cat to use the bathroom in the toilet and flush afterwards.

### Use tasty treats

The first step is to find a treat that your cat goes crazy for. Fresh chicken diced into tiny cubes, bits of tuna, meat-flavored baby food and commercial cat treats are all good choices. Once you've identified treats your cat likes, follow the basic steps of positive reinforcement training (reward-based training) to teach him the behavior you want. Suppose you'd like your cat to sit and stay on a stool while you prepare dinner. You'll first need to start with teaching him to sit when you ask:

- First, make sure you have your cat's attention. Hold the tasty treat in your fingers right at your cat's nose. When your cat begins to sniff the treat, slowly move it in an arc from his nose up just over his head between his ears. Don't raise it straight up or you'll be teaching your cat to stand up on his rear legs rather than sit! Many cats will follow this arc motion with their eyes and nose, and as their chin raises up and back, their rear will go down.
- Second, the instant your cat's bottom touches the floor, praise him and offer the treat. If his rear doesn't go all the way down on the first try, give him the treat anyway. Over several repetitions of practice, give him a treat each time his rear gets slightly closer, until he gets into a complete sit with his rear all the way on the floor.

Cats don't see things well that are still and close-up, so if your cat has difficulty taking the treat from your fingers, try offering it to him in your flat palm or toss it on the floor. He'll see the movement when you toss it and know where the treat is.

### Use a clicker

A clicker can make training easier and faster. If you don't have a clicker, you can use a pen that makes a clicking sound. The instant your cat does the correct behavior, click and then offer the treat. The click lets your cat know the instant he does the right thing and helps him catch on faster. Just make sure you click at the exact moment he does the behavior you want, and then give him the treat. Cats learn through



repetition, just like we do, so you'll need to practice a few times in a row. Keep your training sessions short, just a few minutes at a time. Most cats get bored if you try to drill the same thing over and over.

### **No Punishment!**

While training your cat, keep in mind that cats respond very poorly to punishment! Rather than learning what behavior not to do, a punished cat usually just learns to run away. Depending on your cat's temperament, punishment can frighten your cat to the point where he may hide from you and our family members. Punishment creates stress and stress is one of the most common causes for problem behaviors in cats, including eliminating outside the litter box and compulsive grooming. Stress also compromises the immune system, making your cat more vulnerable to diseases, including feline idiopathic cystitis, or inflammation of the bladder.

It's much easier to train your cat when you reward behaviors you want and offer him more attractive alternatives for behaviors you don't want. Persuasion, not punishment, is the key to training your cat. If you patiently practice and reward your cat with treats, you'll soon have a cat who's sitting on cue and purring contentedly.