

Positive Reinforcement: Training Your Cat

We all like to be praised rather than punished. The same is true for your cat, and that's the theory behind positive reinforcement. Positive reinforcement means giving your pet something pleasant or rewarding immediately after she does something you want her to do. Because your praise or reward makes her more likely to repeat that behavior in the future, it is one of your most powerful tools for shaping or changing your cat's behavior. It's more effective to teach your pet what she should do than try to teach her what she shouldn't.

Correct timing is essential when using positive reinforcement. The reward must occur immediately—within seconds—or your cat may not associate it with the proper action. For example, keep some pieces of dry cat food in your pocket; when your cat uses her scratching post, you can throw a piece for her to chase as a reward. Many cats enjoy chasing (hunting) their food and it's good exercise, too. If you throw the food when she has stopped scratching the post and she is walking towards you, she will think she's being rewarded for coming to you.

Consistency is also an important element in training. Everyone in the family should reward the same desired behaviors.

Using Positive Reinforcement

For your pet, positive reinforcement may include food treats, praise, petting, or a favorite toy or game. When your pet is first learning a new behavior, such as clawing the scratching post instead of your couch, she should be rewarded every time you catch her using her scratching post. You may even help shape her behavior of using the scratching post by spraying it with catnip (if she reacts positively to catnip) or enticing her with a toy that you dangle on the post. This will excite her and cause her to claw at the toy (and the scratching post).

Conversely, avoid taking her over to the scratching post, positioning her paws on the post, and raking them along the post to show your cat what she's supposed to do. This will likely have the opposite effect and make her less likely to use the post. She may interpret your actions as frightening and uncomfortable. It's important to look at the world from her point of view.

Once your cat reliably offers the desired behavior, you may reward her with treats intermittently—for example, three out of every four times she does the behavior. Then, over time, reward her 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 to praise her every time. Your cat will learn that if she keeps offering desired behaviors, eventually she'll get what she wants—your praise and an occasional treat. You won't be forever bound to carry a pocketful of goodies, but it's fun to surprise your cat from time to time.

The Pros and Cons of Punishment

Punishment can be verbal, postural, or physical and is meant to make your pet immediately associate something unpleasant with a behavior you don't want her to engage in. The punishment makes it less likely that the behavior will occur again. To be effective, punishment must be delivered while your pet is engaged in the undesirable behavior—in other words, "caught in the act." If the punishment is delivered too late, even seconds later, your pet will not associate the punishment with the undesired behavior. The punishment will seem totally unpredictable to her.

Remember, cats do not act out of spite or revenge and they don't have a moral sense of right and wrong. Never use physical punishment that involves discomfort or pain; in addition to being inhumane, such punishment may cause your cat to bite, defend herself, or resort to other undesirable behaviors. For example, holding your cat's neck skin and shaking her may result in a frightened cat who scratches or bites to defend herself.

Also, your cat might associate the punishment with other stimuli, including people, who are present at the time the punishment occurs. For example, a cat who is punished for getting too close to a new baby may become fearful of, or

aggressive to, that baby—or to other babies. That's why physical punishment is not only bad for your cat, it's also bad for you and others.

It's easy to understand that punishment delivered by you may erode your cat's trust and frighten her. That's why punishment is most effective when it does not come directly from you. For example, if your cat enjoys scratching the couch, you may apply special double-sided tape to those surfaces. Cats rarely like sticky paws. Thus your cat perceives the couch, and not you, to be delivering the punishment. In this way, too, your cat is more likely to avoid the undesirable behavior even when you're not around. However, it is critical that while discouraging undesirable behaviors, you help your cat understand what you want her to do and provide appropriate outlets for her normal cat behaviors. (For more information on specific tools and techniques to keep your cat away from particular places or to stop her from engaging in certain behaviors, see our tip sheet on [Using Aversives to Modify Your Cat's Behavior](#).)

One of the reasons that cats are such fun companions is that when they're not sleeping, many of them enjoy playing. Playing with your cat will not only help her physical and behavioral development, but it can also reduce undesirable behaviors. Be sure your cat has safe toys to play with by herself, and don't underestimate the power of playing with your cat to strengthen the bond between you and enhance the quality of life for both of you.

Cat Toys: You need them!

Although cats generally have different play styles than their canine counterparts, toys are as much a necessity for cats as they are for dogs. Toys help fight boredom and give cats an outlet for their instinctive prey-chasing behaviors. And when you are the one moving the toy around while your cat fishes for it, chases after it, or jumps in pursuit of it, playtime becomes a bonding experience for you and your cat.

"Safe" Toys

Our mothers always told us "no playing ball in the house," but cats can usually participate in that forbidden exercise without knocking down a vase or a lamp (and being grounded for two weeks). Still, there are plenty of factors that may contribute to the safety of the toy they're batting around.

Many of those factors are completely dependent upon your cat's size, activity level, and preferences. Another factor to be considered is the environment in which your cat spends her time. Although we can't guarantee your cat's enthusiasm or her safety with any specific toy, we can offer the following guidelines.

Be Cautious

The things that are usually the most attractive to cats are often the very things that are the most dangerous. Cat-proof your home by removing string, ribbon, yarn, rubber bands, plastic milk jug rings, paper clips, pins, needles, dental floss, and anything else that could be ingested. All of these items are dangerous, no matter how cute your cat may appear when she's playing with them.

Avoid or alter any toys that aren't "cat-proof" by removing ribbons, feathers, strings, eyes, or other small parts that could be chewed and ingested.

Soft toys should be machine washable. Look for stuffed toys that are labeled as safe for children under three years of age and that don't contain any dangerous fillings. Problem fillings include things like nutshells and polystyrene beads. Also, rigid toys are not as attractive to cats.

Toys We Recommend

Active Toys:

- Round plastic shower curtain rings, which are fun either as a single ring to bat around, hide, or carry, or when linked together and hung in an enticing spot.
- Plastic balls, with or without bells inside.
- Ping-Pong balls and plastic practice golf balls with holes, to help cats carry them. Try putting one in a dry bathtub, as the captive ball is much more fun than one that escapes under the sofa. You'll probably want to remove the balls from the bathtub before bedtime, or you may lose some sleep, as two o'clock in the morning seems to be a prime time for this game.
- Paper bags with any handles removed. Paper bags are good for pouncing, hiding, and interactive play. Plastic bags are *not* a good idea, as many cats like to chew and ingest the plastic.
- Sisal-wrapped toys, which are very attractive to cats who tend to ignore soft toys.
- Empty cardboard tubes from toilet paper and paper towels, made even more fun if you "unwind" a little cardboard to get them started.

Comfort Toys:

- Soft stuffed animals, which are good for several purposes. For some cats, the stuffed animal should be small enough to carry around. For cats who want to wrestle with the toy, the stuffed animal should be about the same size as the cat. Toys with legs and a tail seem to be even more enticing to cats.
- Cardboard boxes, especially those a little too small for your cat to really fit into.

Catnip:

- Catnip-filled soft toys are fun to kick, carry, and rub. Catnip is not addictive and is perfectly safe for cats to roll in, rub in, or eat.
- Plain catnip can be crushed and sprinkled on the carpet or, for easier cleanup, on a towel placed on the floor. Catnip oils will often stay in the carpet, and although they're not visible to us, your cat will still be able to smell them.
- Catnip sprays rarely have enough power to be attractive to cats.
- Not all cats are affected by catnip. Some cats may become over-stimulated to the point of aggressive play and others may become relaxed.
- Kittens under six months old seem to be immune to catnip.

Get the Most Out of Toys

- Rotate your cat's toys weekly by making only a few available at a time. Keep a variety of types easily accessible. If your cat has a favorite, like a soft "baby" that she loves to cuddle with, you may want to leave that one out all the time.
- Provide toys that offer a variety of uses—at least one toy to carry, one to wrestle with, one to roll, and one to "baby."
- "Hide and Seek" is a fun game for cats to play. "Found" toys are often much more attractive than a toy which is obviously introduced.
- Many of your cat's toys should be interactive. Interactive play is very important for your cat because he needs active "people time" —and such play also enhances the bond between you and your pet. Cats generally engage in three types of play—"fishing, flying, and chasing"—and all types are much more engaging for cats when you are part of them.

Fearful Cats

Fight, flee, or freeze. No, it isn't the latest game show sweeping the nation. Instead, these three "F"s describe the ways that cats usually respond to objects, persons, or situations they perceive as a threat. Each cat has his preferred way of dealing with a crisis. You'll notice that your cat probably tends to try one option first, and if that doesn't work, she's forced to try a different option. For instance, if your cat is afraid of dogs and a friend brings his dog to your home to visit,

your cat puffs out her fur to make herself look big, then hisses and spits at the dog. If the dog doesn't retreat, your cat may flee the situation, find a hiding spot, and freeze until she deems the situation safe.

Although some fearful behaviors are acceptable, overly anxious or fearful cats may need a little help from you in the form of training, patience, and love. Here's some guidance on how to handle these situations.

Your cat may show the following behaviors when she is fearful:

- Fleeing
- Hiding
- Aggression (which includes spitting, hissing, growling, swatting, biting, scratching, puffing fur and tail, arching back, swishing tail, and flattening ears)
- Loss of control over bladder and/or bowels
- Freezing in place

It's normal for you to want to help and comfort your cat when she's frightened. However, that isn't necessarily the best thing to do from your cat's point of view. It's normal for a cat to feel insecure or frightened in a new environment. Often, your new cat will hide for a day or two when you first bring her home. Sometimes a traumatic experience—such as taking her for a car ride to the veterinarian or introducing a new animal into the home—can disrupt her routine and send her under the bed for a few days.

What Causes Fearful Behavior?

You'll need to closely observe your cat to determine the trigger for her fearful behavior. Keep in mind that just because *you* know that the person or animal approaching your cat has good intentions doesn't mean your cat shares the same view. The trigger for her fearful behavior could be anything. Some common triggers are:

- A particular person
- A stranger
- Another animal
- A child
- Loud noises

What You Can Do

Take the following steps to reduce your cat's anxiety and help her become more confident:

- First, schedule an appointment with your veterinarian for a thorough physical examination to rule out any medical reasons for your cat's fearful behavior. Cats don't always act sick, even when they are. Any sudden behavior change could mean that your cat is ill. Some common symptoms that suggest your cat may be sick are sudden aggressiveness, hiding, and eliminating outside the litter box.
- If your cat is healthy, but hiding, leave her alone. She'll come out when she's ready. To force her out of her hiding spot will only make her more fearful. Make sure she has easy access to food, water, and her litter box. Clean the litter box and change the food and water every day so you know whether she is eating and drinking.
- Keep any contact with the fear stimulus to a minimum.
- Keep your cat's routine as consistent as possible. Cats feel more confident if they know when to expect daily feeding, playing, cuddling, and grooming.
- Try to desensitize your cat to the fear stimulus by following these steps:
 - Determine what distance your cat can be from the fear stimulus without responding fearfully.
 - Introduce the fear stimulus at this distance while you're feeding your cat tasty treats and praising her.
 - Slowly move the fear stimulus closer as you continue to praise your cat and offer her treats.
 - If at any time during this process your cat shows fearful behavior, you've proceeded too quickly and will need to start over from the beginning. This is the most common mistake people make when

desensitizing an animal, and it can be avoided by working in short sessions, paying careful attention to your cat so that you don't progress too rapidly for her.

- You may need help with the desensitization process from a professional animal-behavior specialist.

What *Not* to Do

- Do not punish your cat for her fearful behavior. Animals associate punishment with what they're doing at the time they're punished, so your cat is likely to associate any punishment you give her with you. This will only cause her to become fearful of you and she still won't understand why she's being punished.
- Do not force your cat to experience the object or situation that is causing her fear. For example, if she is afraid of a certain person, don't let that person try to pick her up and hold her; this will only make her more fearful of that person.
- Be cautious in handling your cat when she is frightened. She may accidentally direct her aggression to you.

Feel Free to visit the Humane Society of the United States information sheets for additional helpful information at http://www.hsus.org/pets/pet_care/our_pets_for_life_program/dog_behavior_tip_sheets/

We would be happy to help you in any way we can. Please do not hesitate to contact us at 847-740-7788 for assistance.



Save-A-Pet Adoption Center
34664 N Fairfield Road
Grayslake, IL 60030
847-740-7788