



From time to time the AAFP will respond to emerging new knowledge or issues that are of concern to veterinary professionals caring for cats. Our position statements, which represent the views of the association, are available at:

www.catvets.com/professionals/guidelines/position/

AAFP Position Statement

Positive reinforcement for cats

Positive reinforcement is defined as giving a reward – something that is desirable for the individual – to increase the likelihood of that behavior recurring.¹ Cats learn best through positive reinforcement.¹ Favorite rewards for cats include delicious treats, catnip, interactive play, and petting or grooming. It is important to remember that the reward must be desirable to that individual cat, and may vary between cats.

Rewards must be given immediately (within three seconds) so that we don't inadvertently reward other behavior that may happen after the desired one. Rewards can be used to train a cat to do a desired behavior or to teach a cat which behavior is wanted. For example, a cat can be taught to sit if rewarded immediately after sitting, and especially if it is done consistently early in training. If we want a cat to scratch on a scratching post, entice it to do so and, when the cat scratches in the desired location, immediately reward.

It is important that rewards are not unintentionally given for undesirable behavior. Ignoring or redirecting negative behavior is the best way to eliminate that behavior. For example, if a cat is

meowing for food and you ignore the cat while meowing, the cat will likely stop meowing to be fed. Feed the cat when it is not meowing.

Punishment can be deleterious, leading to fear and possible fear aggression, stress and stress-associated health and behavior problems, inhibition of learning the desired new behavior, and breakdown of the human–animal bond. Physical punishment should never be used with cats or other animals.² Verbal punishment can also increase fear and possibly fear aggression. Verbal punishment also focuses attention on the undesired behavior of the cat and may inadvertently reward it.

References

- 1 Overall KL, Rodan I, Beaver B, et al. Feline behavior guidelines from the American Association of Feline Practitioners. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2005; 227: 70–84.
- 2 AVSAB Position Statement. Use of punishment for the behavior modification of animals. http://www.avsonline.org/avsonline/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=80&Itemid=366

Chair: Ilona Rodan. Members: Wendy Simpson, Paula Monroe-Aldridge, Sarah Anderson, Mike Westfall