



POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT TRAINING EDUCATIONAL TOOLKIT



FELINE VETERINARY MEDICAL ASSOCIATION
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EDUCATIONAL TOOLKIT



Cats are intelligent, resourceful, and fun to have as companions in our lives. Cats are always learning; they observe their environment and the behaviors of living beings around them. These observations allow them to develop as individuals.

When cats engage in a desirable behavior that is positively reinforced, chances are high that they will continue this behavior in order to receive their positive reward. For example, if a cat gets praised and petted appropriately after using a new scratching post, they will learn it is "good" and will continue to use it. This is positive reinforcement, and it is the best way for caregivers to interact with cats to develop a healthy relationship and a happy life for their cats.

When a cat's behavior results in what they perceive as a negative experience, they will try to avoid all stimuli associated with this interaction. A good example is a cat's self-protective reactions to being placed into a carrier. If a cat is chased around the house, forced into a carrier, and is fearful during this interaction, they will hide and become even more fearful whenever they see the carrier in the future. When a cat is fearful, their ability to learn and the relationship between the person and the cat will diminish. This is why punishing a cat, such as by using a loud noise when a cat is meowing, or a squirt bottle with water when a cat is on the counter, is not recommended, and it is actually counterproductive. Chasing the cat and forcing them into a carrier will lead to a fearful-anxious response, which will escalate into further avoidance behavior.

Instructions for Use

This Educational Toolkit is intended to be an implementation tool for veterinary professionals to access and gather information quickly. It is not intended as a complete review of the various techniques that help support positive reinforcement training.

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Conflict of Interest

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HOW CATS LEARN

Learning Processes

Cats are always learning, even when they appear inactive. Simply being exposed to an environment in which stimuli are present will result in learning.

How cats experience their environment, including how they perceive their surroundings, results in emotional responses that lead to behavioral changes. These observable behavioral changes are associated with anatomical and physiological changes, primarily in the brain. These behavioral and organic processes constitute learning.

Non-associative Learning

Learning that does not require an association between events or stimuli is called non-associative learning.

- Cats exposed to a perceived safe and irrelevant stimulus will get used to (or *habituated* to) it and ignore it; if something is perceived as threatening and potentially dangerous, they will become more fearful-anxious (or *sensitized*) around it.
- It is a very important form of learning, especially in very young cats, because it determines what stimuli a cat will react to (or ignore) in their environment.
- For example, a cat exposed to loud household noises—such as a vacuum—early in life may be less likely to develop intense fear-anxiety of them later on.



Associative Learning

Classical Conditioning

Cats learn from the association of specific events or stimuli. In classical conditioning, these events or stimuli occur naturally and do not require voluntary action from the cat.

- Occurs when cats form an association between specific stimuli.
- A cat will spontaneously have a negative or protective emotional response to painful stimuli.

- Example: If a specific painful stimulus, such as being pinched by a needle, is always preceded by the sight of the needle itself, the simple sight of the needle will soon trigger the same protective response that the pinch used to trigger. If the veterinarian is part of the picture, a cat may also develop a protective emotional response to their sight. This learning process is called associative learning via classical conditioning

Operant Conditioning

This type of learning is mainly associated with training. In this learning process, cats associate their voluntary actions with the consequences.

- If a cat obtains their desired consequence, the behavior frequency increases (Reinforcement).
- **Positive Reinforcement:** Adding something pleasant for the cat (e.g., giving a treat when a cat sits for us). The cat will be more likely to sit in the future due to positive reinforcement. **Positive reinforcement training should always be used in training.**

Engaging (Positive) Emotions

- Engaging emotions like desire-seeking lead to:
 - Predatory behavior
 - Seeking high-value foods (e.g., treats)
 - Seeking pleasure, comfort, +/- social interactions
 - Reward-based or positive reinforcement training
 - It also leads to optimism associated with increased activity of brain regions in the reward-seeking system
- The activation of engaging emotions is highly motivating for cats, in contrast to protective (negative) emotions.
- Cats trained with methods that elicit engaging emotions have improved welfare and demonstrate more willingness to engage and cooperate, including in veterinary procedures.
- Eliciting engaging emotions through positive reinforcement training usually leads to better outcomes behaviorally and physically than cats who are frequently exposed to aversive stimuli.

Protective (Negative) Emotions

- Fear-anxiety, pain, and frustration are protective emotions that a cat can experience when facing an aversive stimulus, triggering behavioral responses.

- In natural conditions, a cat experiencing these emotions would inhibit, avoid, or repel the aversive stimulus, resulting in an adaptive and short-lived response.
- Companion cats cannot always avoid or remove aversive stimuli as they have limited control of their environment (please see the Setting Up the Environment for Success section of this Toolkit for more information); their protective emotions can remain activated for a long time and cause chronic distress, which is maladaptive and highly detrimental to their physical, emotional, and cognitive health.
- Fear-anxiety is, in fact, the emotion that allowed ancestral cats to stay away from danger, survive, and evolve. A fearful or anxious cat will learn protective behaviors very quickly but will not be able to focus on complex positive associations acquired via operant conditioning. For this reason, a distressed or fearful-anxious cat will be more resistant to training and may refuse even the most enticing treat.
- Aversive stimuli (commonly, but not always appropriately, called punishment and corrections) should be avoided when handling or training cats.

A Healthy Cat is a Better Learner

There is growing evidence of the influence physical health has on learning.

- **Medical Assessment First**
 - When a cat shows difficulties in learning or demonstrates stress-related behaviors, a thorough medical assessment is essential to investigate whether the cat's physical health affects their emotional and cognitive health
- **Impact of Behavioral Health**
 - Poor emotional health (e.g., chronic fear-anxiety) or cognitive health (e.g., cognitive dysfunction) can affect learning, training, and collaborative handling
 - Changes in behavior may be caused by stressors such as cats being indoor-only, intercat tension, recent change in diet, etc.

Two key mechanisms linking physical health and learning are:

1. Sickness

- Illness exerts a depressive effect on the brain; a sick cat is distressed, and a distressed cat is not a good learner

2. Immune/Inflammatory Response

- Traditionally associated with physical signs such as fever, these changes also affect emotional and behavioral responses and cognition

- For instance, cats with low-grade chronic inflammation typical of aging may show altered interactions with humans in challenging situations, such as when interacting with the cat at home or in the veterinary practice

THE IMPACT OF PAIN

- **Pain is a psychophysical experience:** Pain is both a protective emotion and a physical sensation, involving nociception (the perception of a noxious stimulus).
- **Behavioral signs of pain exacerbate fear-anxiety:** Pain's inflammatory component can directly affect how the brain regulates behavior.
- **Pain assessment is essential:** Assess for pain whenever a cat shows unexpected changes or difficulties in learning. Please refer to the FelineVMA Chronic Pain Educational Toolkit for further information.

Role of the Microbiota and Immune/Inflammatory Response

- An additional layer of complexity is added by the roles that the bacterial microbiota of the gut and skin play in regulating metabolic and immune/inflammatory responses, and thereby influencing a cat's physical and behavioral health.
- A diverse and balanced microbiome has been associated with better behavioral and physical health in different species.
- Dysbiosis can cause behavioral and cognitive alterations.
- It has been shown that cats with chronic inflammatory gastrointestinal or skin disease show more anxious and etepimeletic (care-soliciting) behaviors.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Continuous Learning:** Cats are always learning through non-associative and associative processes.
- **Emotional State Matters:** Chronic distress, such as fear-anxiety, can overshadow positive reinforcement and hinder learning.
- **Physical Health Counts:** Chronic pain, inflammation, or illness can diminish a cat's ability to learn. Veterinary assessment is crucial.
- **Positive Training Wins:** Reward-based methods encourage better cooperation, enhance wellbeing, and improve learning outcomes.
- **Punishment:** **Punishment-based training is never recommended.**



SETTING UP THE ENVIRONMENT FOR SUCCESS

Veterinarians are uniquely positioned to aid caregivers in understanding normal feline behavior, preventing undesirable behaviors, and providing information on positive reinforcement training. Successful positive reinforcement training can strengthen the caregiver-cat bond and improve the quality of life for the individual cat.

Understanding Normal Feline Behavior

- As both a predator and a prey species, cats are naturally solitary hunters, and their hunting instincts persist in the home environment.
- Without appropriate outlets for those instincts, normal feline behaviors may manifest in a way that is undesirable to the caregivers in the home.
- Normal feline behaviors may vary based on life stage (see the *2021 AAHA/AAFP Feline Life Stage Guidelines*).

Object Play Behavior

- Normal play behavior in cats and kittens mimics the hunt. Chasing, pouncing, biting, and clawing their “prey” is normal.
- Most kittens have a very strong play drive, while normal play behavior in senior cats may be more subdued.
- Object play behavior can also be highly individual, with some cats playing more than others.

Social Play Behavior

- Social play, in which cats direct these behaviors toward a companion cat, can also occur.
 - Healthy social play can look like fighting, but play can be distinguished through an observation of the interactions between the cats
 - Social play, as opposed to object play, typically wanes at social maturity, at ~1–2 years of age
 - A young cat will often want to play socially with a cat that is socially mature and who doesn’t appreciate or reciprocate the play, especially if there is insufficient object play for the younger cat
- For more information on social play, see the *2024 AAFP Intercat Tension Guidelines: Recognition, Prevention, and Management* and Video 7: Play between two affiliated cats in a multi-cat household in the Practice Guideline supplemental materials.

Urination & Defecation

- When not constrained by a home environment, cats will often dig and posture around a large area before settling on a spot to urinate or defecate.
- Soft substrates (e.g., sand, dirt), which can be used to bury the urine or fecal matter, are typically preferred.
- Urine and feces also contain pheromones, which send communicative signals to other cats in the environment.
 - Messages communicated include the time of the cat's presence, sexual or mating status, and emotional state
 - Therefore, it is normal for urine (and rarely fecal) marking to occur in a large variety of areas
 - The deposition of scent, so that the environment contains the cat's smell, can provide a calming effect for cats
- Urine or fecal soiling or marking outside of the litter box is undesirable for caregivers but not inappropriate for the cat. Causes include an underlying medical problem, feline idiopathic cystitis, or other sources of distress in the physical and/or social environment of the cat (see *2014 AAFP/ISFM Guidelines for Diagnosing and Solving House-soiling Behavior in Cats*, *2013 AAFP/ISFM Environmental Needs Guidelines*, and *2024 AAFP Intercat Tension Guidelines: Recognition, Prevention, and Management*).

Scratching

- Scratching is a normal feline behavior that functions to maintain claw health, deposit the cat's scent in the environment, and leave a visual cue to other cats of the cat's presence.
- Cats may have preferences for different types of scratching surfaces; carpet, wood, rope, and cardboard are commonly preferred substrates.
- Also, cats may prefer scratching surfaces that are vertical, horizontal, or angled.
- These preferences may change with life stage, particularly if chronic conditions such as degenerative joint disease develop as the cat matures.
 - An example is a senior cat who previously scratched on vertical surfaces and now only scratches on horizontal surfaces
- See the *FelineVMA Claw Friendly Educational Toolkit* for more details.

Jumping and Climbing on (or under) Furniture

- In an outdoor environment, it is normal behavior for cats to climb trees in order to survey the area or to hide from what they fear.
- Vertical space and hiding options, such as cat beds and boxes, are critically important in an indoor environment to provide elevated options and to increase overall space. These preferences may also vary depending on life stage.

Attention-seeking Behaviors

- Certain vocal cues, such as the cat's meow, are often targeted toward the caregiver in order to solicit attention.
- Cats may also return to locations in which attention has previously been given (such as jumping into the caregiver's lap, onto a desk, or into the bed).
- Cats engage in other human-directed social behaviors, such as rubbing (when the cat rubs part of their body against a person).
 - Rubbing is often directed toward the caregiver when the cat is seeking attention or when the cat has been reunited with their caregiver after a brief separation, and it helps strengthen the human-cat relationship
 - Engaging in rubbing on furniture and/or other surfaces marks territory and can help calm the cat in stressful situations
- Some normal attention-seeking behaviors may be undesirable to the caregiver (e.g., vocalizing), and those undesirable behaviors may have been unintentionally positively reinforced by the caregiver by previously giving the cat attention while the cat was engaging in such behavior.

Eagerness to Learn

- Cats of all ages have the ability to learn from their surroundings. Energy level, curiosity, attention span, and motivation to learn are traits which are highly variable in cats, with some individuals having significantly more drive to learn than others.
- Certain breeds have a tendency to possess these traits more prominently.
- Any individual cat, in which these traits are strong, may have a propensity for boredom and will require a greater investment on the part of the caregiver to meet the cat's environmental needs and prevent unwanted behaviors.
- Positive reinforcement training is important for all cats (e.g., carrier training), but essential for individual cats with boredom.

Distress and Learning

- Fear-anxiety, pain, frustration, and other protective (negative) emotions may interfere with learning.
- Distress occurs when these protective emotions exceed the individual cat's coping abilities.
- Cats experiencing distress may react with appeasement (occurs less frequently in cats than other responses), inhibition, avoidance, and/or repelling behavioral responses (see *2022 AAFP/ISFM Cat Friendly Veterinary Interaction Guidelines: Approach and Handling Techniques*).
 - Repelling behavior usually only occurs in the absence of the ability for the cat to successfully avoid what they perceive to be a threat
 - The cat may exhibit protective emotions, demonstrated through body language
 - Facial expressions change more quickly than body language and include rotating the ears to the side or back, partially or fully dilating the pupils, rapidly blinking, staring, engaging in excessive lip-licking, and/or tightening or splaying the whiskers
 - Body language includes hypervigilance, lack of or feigned sleep, breathing rapidly, crouching, arching their back, and piloerection

Feline Emotions and Behavior Scale

Feline communication — What is the cat telling us?

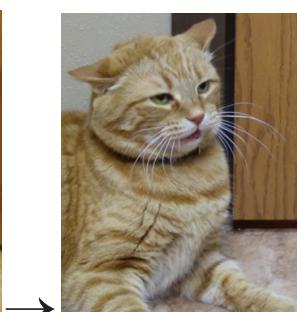
Facial expressions: more immediate response



Calm



Progression from mild to increased intensity of protective emotions (e.g., fear) and behavioral responses.



Images courtesy of Dr. Ilona Rodan

- A crouched stance, piloerection, hissing, or growling also may indicate the cat is experiencing distress
- Creating the right environment, which minimizes protective emotions and distress, is critical to maximizing the cat's ability to learn.

Meet Environmental Needs

- First and foremost, each cat's environmental needs must be met.
- The cat must perceive the environment as safe; providing hiding and climbing surfaces, which allow the cat a sense of safety, control, and familiarity within their environment.
- Multiple and separate key environmental resources, including food, water, resting spaces, toileting areas, scratching surfaces, and opportunity for play/predatory behavior, must be provided.
- These resources must be dispersed throughout the cat's environment and provided in the correct locations for the cat.
- Items that cats leave their scent on, such as toileting areas and scratching surfaces, should be spread out within the home and located in areas of the house where the cat spends time.
- Interactions with humans in the environment should be positive, predictable, consistent, and tailored to the preferences of the individual cat. Finally, the environment must respect the cat's senses, including smell (see the 2024 AAFP *Intercat Tension Guidelines: Recognition, Prevention, and Management*, 2022 ISFM/AAFP *Cat Friendly Veterinary Environment Guidelines*, and the 2013 AAFP/ISFM *Environmental Needs Guidelines* for more information).

Reduce Stressors in the Environment

- Cats prefer a familiar space with hiding and perching options.
- Unfamiliar smells, sounds, sights, and tastes are often perceived as threatening to a cat and should be avoided when possible. When not possible, they should be gradually introduced at a pace or intensity that does not cause feline fear-anxiety.
- Strong or offensive smells, loud or offensive sounds, undesirable tastes, cold surfaces, and visual threats can add to the cat's distress and should be avoided.

Minimize Distractions

- Both the cat and the caregiver involved in the positive reinforcement training exercise should be engaged and focused.

- If either the cat or the caregiver is distracted, training is less likely to be successful.
- Training sessions in which the caregiver or cat begin to become distracted or frustrated should be promptly ended to ensure training sessions stay rewarding for both individuals.

Optimize Rewards to Cater to Individual Preferences

- Food rewards are very commonly used in positive reinforcement training. Although food may be an effective reward for many cats, other individual cats may prefer alternative rewards, such as petting, play, or brushing (see the Positive Reinforcement Techniques to Prevent Unwanted Behaviors section of this Toolkit for more information).
- Regardless of what reward is chosen, the individual cat's preferences must be the priority in order to use the reward for positive reinforcement training.
 - Treats are more likely to be successful for a food-motivated cat, whereas human affection is more likely to be successful in cats who exhibit attention-seeking behavior. See the Positive Reinforcement Techniques to Prevent Unwanted Behaviors section of this Toolkit for more information on how to identify preferred rewards for training

Start Early

- Positive reinforcement training may be performed at any age.
- However, beginning an individual cat's training during kittenhood can prevent undesirable behaviors from developing and can strengthen the caregiver-cat bond.

Smaller, More Frequent Training Sessions

- The feline attention span is short, and repetition is required for successful learning. Therefore, shorter, more frequent training sessions tend to be more successful than longer training periods.
- Caregivers should aim for multiple 5–10-minute training sessions per day rather than scheduling an hour block to work with the cat.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Normal Behaviors:** Scratching, climbing, hunting-style play, and scent marking are normal feline behaviors—even if sometimes undesirable to caregivers.
- **Environment Matters:** Providing safe spaces, hiding spots, multiple resources, and vertical areas help reduce stress and prevent unwanted behaviors.
- **Reward Training:** Reward-based training prevents unwanted behaviors, promotes desired behaviors, and strengthens the caregiver-cat bond. Start early and keep sessions short and frequent.
- **Individual Preferences:** Use each cat's preferred reward—food, play, or attention—for the best results.
- **Attention-Seeking & Unwanted Behaviors:** Be mindful to avoid unintentionally reinforcing behaviors like vocalizing or scratching by giving attention at the wrong times.
- **Recognize Signs of Distress:** Fear-anxiety, pain, or frustration can interfere with learning. Watch for changes in body language and seek veterinary assessment if needed.
- **Reduce Stressors:** Minimize unfamiliar smells, sounds, and sights; introduce changes slowly to prevent fear-anxiety.



POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT TECHNIQUES TO PREVENT UNWANTED BEHAVIORS

Finding the Right Reward

While food is most commonly used as a reward for training, 63% of cats actually prefer a reward other than food, highlighting the need to consider a broader array of rewards when working with cats. In a study of cat preferences:

- 50% preferred a form of human social interaction (e.g., being petted/played with in a cat-preferred manner).
- 37% preferred food.
- 11% preferred toys.
- 2% preferred a scent.

Importance of Tailored Rewards

The best reward to use in training is one that is appealing to the specific cat.

- Since every cat has unique preferences, a caregiver should identify what the cat prefers instead of deciding for their cat, providing the cat with some choice and control. This can be done with a simple preference assessment at the beginning of the training session:
 - Pick a few possible rewards
 - Present them to the cat
 - Observe which item or items the cat interacts with the most
- If a cat is presented with a small amount of lickable tube treat, a feather toy, or petting over the facial glands and the cat spends the most time pawing the toy, this indicates the toy may be the most appealing item for training that day.
- Just like people, cats' preferences can change based on their experiences. The same cat may prefer treats on days when they have already had enough social play.
- For more ideas of rewards, see the Behavior Modification Recommendations for Multiple-cat Households handout from the 2024 AAFP *Intercat Tension Guidelines: Recognition, Prevention, and Management*.

For a reward to serve as a reinforcer (in operant conditioning via positive reinforcement), the reward must strengthen the behavior you are rewarding. It is important to see how the delivery of the reward impacts the cat's behavior. If the behavior does not change in response to the reward, then try changing to another highly preferred reward and see if it reinforces (increases the occurrence of) the behavior.

Timing is Everything

Another consideration is the timing of the reward.

- The reward needs to be delivered immediately after the behavior being reinforced. For example, to reinforce a cat for sitting, the cat should be given the reward immediately upon sitting.
- At times, especially for some advanced behaviors, it may be difficult to reward the cat immediately after they have engaged in the behavior. In these instances, the use of a training tool, such as a conditioned reinforcer (see below), may be appropriate.
- Cats should be trained individually.

Cats learn at different rates—one cat may learn the desired behavior quickly, while another may need more time. Some factors to consider are:

- Do not train if the cat demonstrates protective behaviors (e.g., hiding, crouching, growling, hissing).
- Do not conduct training sessions for ill or painful cats.
- Ensure the reward is highly desirable for the individual, and the timing is right.
- Avoid distractions during training.

In all species, certain individuals are slower learners. Be patient with these cats as long as they are healthy and calm, as they still benefit from learning.

TRAINING TOOLS

Conditional Reinforcers

Conditioned reinforcers—like a sound or word (e.g., a click from a training clicker or pen)—are common in feline training and should only be used during the training session, especially for behaviors that are difficult to reward immediately. For example, when training a cat to give a paw or high-five, it might be hard to reward them right away because you need time to grab a treat or reward. In these cases, a conditioned reinforcer—like a click sound—can be used to mark the exact moment the cat does the behavior, helping connect the action to the reward even if there is a short delay.

How Conditioned Reinforcers Work

- A sound (e.g., a clicker, other noise, or word) or hand signal is classically conditioned to have meaning to the cat by pairing the sound with a reward that immediately follows.
- Over time, an association is built between the neutral stimulus (e.g., clicking sound) and the delivery of a reward.
- Once conditioned, the cat will expect to receive a reward after the newly conditioned stimulus (e.g., clicking sound).
- This then allows the trainer to use the conditioned reinforcer to guide the cat. When a correct behavior is displayed, it is marked with the reinforcer (e.g., clicking sound) and followed up with a reward as soon as possible.

Challenges with Clickers

- Although clickers can be useful training tools that have been successfully used in kitten training and socialization classes, clickers might not be the best training tool for every cat or behavior. Research has found that some cats take longer to learn a task when taught with a clicker.
- The “click” sound can be too loud and aversive to some cats.
 - To soften the sound, the clicker could be placed in the person’s pocket or wrapped in a cloth
 - Social praise, such as saying “Good Kitty!” can also be used in the same way to “mark” a desired behavior and may be less aversive
 - Consider the use of a target stick as a conditioned reinforcer to mark the desired behavior

- For deaf cats and cats that are highly reactive to sounds, use a hand signal to train the cat.
- If clicker training is not possible, caregivers can focus on primary reinforcement of the behavior. In primary reinforcement, the reward is given directly to the cat as soon as possible after the behavior has been displayed, without the use of a conditioned reinforcer between the behavior and reward. Primary reinforcement can be used with other helpful training tools, such as shaping, luring, and targeting, to help teach behaviors. More about each of these is explained below.

Shaping

Shaping is the practice of teaching behaviors in small, incremental steps, using operant conditioning via positive reinforcement. Shaping allows a caregiver to slowly train a behavior instead of expecting a cat to pick up on a complex behavior immediately.

Case Example: How Shaping Works

Shaping a behavior means teaching the behavior step-by-step. Each small step builds on the last, and the cat gets a reward for completing each one. As the cat learns, the steps get a little harder. For example, to teach a cat to use a cat door, the steps might look like this below. Note—a cat might skip a step, but should be rewarded each time to reinforce that step as part of the behavior being trained.

The steps to reinforce with a reward would be:

1. Any time the cat looks at the cat door.
2. Any movement toward the cat door.
3. The cat standing near the cat door.
4. The cat putting any part of their body on the cat door.
5. The cat putting one paw on the cat door.
6. The cat putting one paw through the cat door.
7. The cat putting the head through the cat door.
8. The cat putting the front of their body through the cat door.
9. The cat walking fully through the cat door.

Using the plan above, we see how a complex behavior can be broken down into manageable steps that slowly build on the behavior. Shaping is an extremely useful tool for training cats, but even more success can be achieved when pairing shaping with other training tools.

Luring

Luring is the practice of using a reward to directly guide a cat's behavior. Luring is also an application of operant conditioning via positive reinforcement.

How Luring Works

- Returning to the cat-door shaping plan (see Case Example: How Shaping Works box on the prior page), a bit of food can be placed in front of the cat and used to slowly guide them toward the front of the door, effectively skipping to Step Three.
- If the cat prefers playing, use their toy to guide them to the front of the cat door, and then lure them through the door with the toy.
- After the cat has engaged in the behavior, reinforce the cat with their preferred reward, then try to repeat the behavior.

Challenges with Luring

Because the desired behavior is initially induced by the caregiver, and not independently and voluntarily initiated by the cat—which is a fundamental first step to learn via operant conditioning—luring may be less effective than shaping and capturing (see page 21) for teaching complex behavior.

Targeting

Targeting is the practice of teaching a cat to approach and touch an object. Options for target sticks include a commercial target stick that extends (best for cats that nip hands) or a household item such as a chopstick or a pen with the cap on as their target stick (see the Behavior Modification Recommendations for Multiple-cat Households handout).

How Targeting Works

To teach targeting, the following shaping plan can be utilized:

1. Place the target stick directly in front of the cat's nose and reward the cat for touching the stick with their nose.
2. Place the target stick slightly further from the cat's nose and reward the cat for touching the stick with their nose.
3. Place the target stick several inches from the cat's nose and reward the cat for approaching and touching the stick with their nose.
4. Place the target stick a foot away from the cat's nose and reward the cat for approaching and touching the stick with their nose.
5. Continue to increase the distance between the cat and the target stick.

By using the steps above, caregivers can train their cat to approach and touch the target stick. Eventually, the cat will learn that approaching and touching the stick leads to something good (the reward). The stick can then be used for training to guide the cat's behavior.

Targeting and Luring Together

To further facilitate learning, a lure could also be used to teach targeting (the cat approaching and touching an object). A preferred soft food or lickable tube treat could be placed on the end of the target stick, which will encourage the cat to sniff the stick and lick it to be immediately rewarded for the targeting behavior.

Capturing

Capturing involves the practice of reinforcing a behavior that your cat already performs.

Natural Behavior Capture

- Cats naturally sit down. This “sit” behavior can be captured and reinforced by rewarding the cat when they sit on their own.
- When the caregiver sees the cat sit, the cat can be rewarded with social praise, such as saying, “Good job!”
- Caregivers can also have treats or a toy handy, so they are prepared to reward the cat with their preferred treat following the sit behavior.



Image courtesy of Dr. Ilona Rodan

Identifying Opportunities for Behavior Capture

- Caregivers can watch their cat's daily activities and find times when their cat often does the behavior they want to capture (e.g., the cat sitting while waiting for their meal).
- Capturing a behavior induces very effective learning via operant conditioning, as the desired behavior to reinforce is independently and voluntarily offered by the cat.

Putting Behaviors on Cue

Once you have taught a behavior (such as the example of sitting described above), that behavior can be put on a cue so that the caregiver can ask the cat to engage in that behavior when desired by the caregiver.

Integrating Cues

- A verbal word (such as “sit”) or a visual cue (such as a hand signal) can be integrated so it can be used to ask the cat to sit in the future.
- The cue should be introduced after the cat reliably engages in the behavior (e.g., sitting); then, the cue can be presented at the same time as the behavior (e.g., by saying the word “sit” at the same time the cat sits). Then, start to introduce the cue immediately before the cat engages in the behavior and gradually increase the time so that the cue precedes the behavior. For example:
 1. Watch for the cat to sit. When the cat sits down fully, say the cue word “Sit” and provide a reward. Repeat this step several times.
 2. Watch for the cat to sit. Just as you see the cat beginning to sit (but before the cat’s behind is on the ground), say the cue word “Sit” and provide a reward. Repeat this step several times.
 3. Now say “Sit.” The cat should sit in response to the cue.

Cooperative Care

- Cooperative care is training a cat to willingly cooperate in their own care, both at home and in the veterinary practice.
- As with all positive reinforcement training, it should occur in healthy and not painful cats and when they do not demonstrate fear-anxiety or other protective emotions. Cooperative care requires a team approach, with veterinary professionals educating caregivers how to train their cat to willingly cooperate with their care in a safe place in the home environment.
- Common cooperative skills include training targeting and stationing, asking the cat to move into a certain position, or teaching the cat to offer their tail or limb voluntarily.
- Cooperative care replaces physical restraint, minimizing fear-anxiety and other feline protective behaviors, as well as subsequent human injury. See *2022 AAFP/ISFM Cat Friendly Veterinary Interaction Guidelines: Approach and Handling Techniques*.

Implementing Training Tools in Cooperative Care

- Targeting is a great skill to start with because it can be used to “ask” the cat to do a behavior, rather than force them to do the behavior.
- For example, a caregiver can use the target stick to guide the cat into the carrier and then reinforce the cat once they have stepped into the carrier. This again gives the cat more agency and control over their own behavior and environment.
- The table below highlights a few skills that could be trained, along with a brief explanation of how to train each skill.

TABLE: COOPERATIVE CARE TRAINING TABLE. EACH SKILL CAN BE ADAPTED TO THE INDIVIDUAL CAT'S PREFERENCE AND COMFORT LEVEL

TRAINING TOOL	COOPERATIVE SKILL	HOW TO TRAIN
Targeting	Guide the cat to location (e.g., into a cat carrier or onto a scale) or ask cat to change body position (e.g., stand up).	Shape behavior by reinforcing approaching and touching of the target stick with the cat's preferred reward. Start with a target stick directly in front of the cat and slowly increase the distance the cat needs to move to touch the target stick.
Lure	Guide cat to the location (e.g., into a cat carrier or onto a scale) or ask cat to change body position (e.g., stand up).	Use an appetitive reward, such as a piece of food or a toy, to guide the cat's behavior.
Capturing and Shaping	Place one leg outstretched (to cooperate in future venipuncture or vaccination procedures).	Watch for times when the cat outstretches their leg, such as before or after a nap, when a cat is likely to stretch. When the cat's leg is outstretched, reward the cat. Do this several times. Then, slowly increase the amount of time the cat must keep their leg outstretched before they can receive the reward.
Capturing and Shaping	Open mouth (for oral examination).	Watch the cat for any time their mouth may be open, such as when playing with a toy. Reinforce (reward) the mouth being open and then slowly increase the criteria so that the cat's mouth needs to be open for longer periods of time before the cat gets the reward.

Carrier Training

- Carrier training a cat is one of the most beneficial steps a caregiver can take, as it makes ongoing trips to the veterinarian smoother and reduces fear-anxiety for the cat while lowering stress for the caregiver.
- For veterinary professionals, a carrier-trained cat arrives with fewer stressors, creating a calmer environment and a more pleasant visit for everyone involved. Tips for caregivers can be found in *Getting Your Cat to the Veterinarian* on catfriendly.com.
- All of the Training Tools listed in this section (e.g., capturing, luring, etc.) can be used to associate positive associations with the carrier, train a cat to enter their carrier, and accept it as a safe place.
- More information can be found in the *2022 AAFP/ISFM Cat Friendly Veterinary Interaction Guidelines: Approach and Handling Techniques* and the *2022 ISFM/AAFP Cat Friendly Veterinary Environment Guidelines*.



Images courtesy of Dr. Katrina Breitreiter

Training in Multi-cat Households

- Joint training sessions are not recommended for cats with a history of tension, as they could increase conflict.
 - In these cases, it is best to separate the cats during training. If two people are available, each person can work with one cat at the same time
 - If only one person is available, provide the other cat with a food puzzle or enrichment activity in another room to keep them occupied. Once the first training session is finished, switch the cats and allow the first cat to enjoy the enrichment in a separate room while the other cat takes their turn for training
 - If the cats have not been separated and another cat walks up and sees a cat being rewarded with a treat, ask the cat who approached to perform a simple behavior they already know, such as to sit. If the cat is not yet trained to do a behavior, use a treat to lure them to a specific spot and then reward them. This ensures the new cat earns a reward for doing a behavior, either sitting or following. Afterward, shift your focus back to the other cat, ask for an easy behavior, reward them, and then alternate between the two. Keep in mind separation is best for cats that are not bonded
 - In certain situations, separation may not be possible. An example of this might be if you are training a cat to use a scratching post, and they wake up from a nap and immediately go over to scratch the post (as there is not time to separate the cats). Here, you could praise them by saying, "Good job, Fluffy!" If another cat runs over after hearing the praise (which is common), ask the new cat to do a simple behavior, like "sit," and then reward them for that (see above)
- Joint training sessions work best for cats who are bonded or generally get along well.
 - In these cases, consider each cat's individual skills and tailor your training accordingly. If one cat reliably sits on cue, ask for that behavior, and if the other cat is good at following a target, use that instead. Focus on each cat's strengths and keep behaviors simple at first. Work up to more complex behaviors as the cats get more comfortable training together
 - Alternate between cats, asking them each to do their behavior (which might be different). Often, this timing works out well and by the time one cat finishes their turn and is rewarded, the other cat has finished eating their treat and is ready to show their next behavior
 - Try to keep cats spaced, with about three feet or so between them. If needed, the treat can be used to move one cat farther from the other cat

- If one cat starts to show signs of frustration, wrap up the training session but aim to finish on a good note. You can again ask them to do a simple behavior, praise the cats for a good job, and then end the session by rewarding each of them with their treat/meal or a bout of play

Reinforcement to Improve Welfare

- Cooperative care allows us to reinforce behaviors useful for working with our cats, rather than against our cats.
- There are other behaviors that are important to teach which provide cats with the opportunity to express natural behavior. This can increase feline welfare and reduce unwanted behaviors.
 - For example, many cats would benefit from safe outdoor experiences (e.g., outdoor catio, cat enclosure, walking on a harness and leash), which can enhance a cat's wellbeing, allowing them to engage in natural behaviors, such as sniffing, scent marking, and exploration
 - This can be done through the provision of an outdoor catio or cat enclosure. The cat can be trained to enter and exit through a cat door, as described above
 - A cat can also be trained to walk on a harness and leash
- Other welfare behaviors, such as scratching, can be reinforced the same way.
 - When a cat is seen using their scratching post, the caregiver can praise the cat and reinforce with a treat or bout of play
 - The more this is done, the more the cat will scratch the post, rather than the person's favorite piece of furniture
- Training that allows cats to solve problems enhances their welfare and reduces unwanted behavioral issues.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Finding the Right Reward:** Food isn't always the best reward; many cats prefer human social interaction or toys.
- **Importance of Tailored Rewards:** Identify what a specific cat prefers by presenting options and observing their interactions. A cat's preferences can also change daily.
- **Timing is Everything:** Deliver the reward immediately after the behavior you are reinforcing.
- **Training Tools:** Tools like a conditioned reinforcer (e.g., clicker or verbal praise) can be used to "mark" a behavior when an immediate reward isn't possible.
- **Shaping:** Teach a complex behavior in small, incremental steps, reinforcing each step with a reward.
- **Luring:** Use a reward to guide a cat's behavior, but know that it may be less effective for complex behaviors.
- **Targeting:** Teach a cat to approach and touch an object, which can then be used to guide their behavior.
- **Capturing:** Reinforce a behavior that a cat already performs on their own, such as sitting.
- **Cooperative Care:** Train a cat to willingly cooperate in their own care, which can replace physical restraint and minimize fear and stress.



TRAINING TECHNIQUES FOR ADDRESSING UNDESIRABLE BEHAVIORS

While it is easier to prevent undesirable behaviors than to manage them (see Techniques to Prevent Unwanted Behaviors section of this Toolkit), positive reinforcement training can still help reverse these behaviors.

Disciplining Can Have Negative Effects

- Disciplining in the form of verbal or physical punishment (e.g., using squirt bottles) in an attempt to stop unwanted behaviors can increase feline protective emotions, lead to additional undesirable behaviors, and potentially break down the human-cat relationship.
- The protective emotions also make it more difficult for the cat to learn new behaviors.
- Since many behaviors perceived as undesirable to the caregiver are normal cat behaviors or inadvertently rewarded, a change in human behavior is often needed. For example, if a cat is scratching a sofa, using a furniture protector for the sofa and placing a tall, sturdy scratching post or cat tree in that location will allow the cat to engage in normal scratching behavior on an item that caregivers prefer to be scratched. The cat is then rewarded for scratching on the desired surface, and the caregiver can implement positive reinforcement techniques (see the Positive Reinforcement Techniques to Prevent Unwanted Behaviors section of this Toolkit for more information).

USE OF SYNTHETIC FELINE PHEROMONES

- Cats performing undesirable behaviors often have distress (decreased coping ability) and may benefit from the addition of synthetic feline pheromones in order to set cats up for success.

FREQUENTLY OBSERVED BEHAVIORS IN THE HOME

Waking Caregivers Early

This attention-seeking behavior can include vocalizing, pawing at caregivers, or knocking items off dressers and shelves. Because cats typically eat at dusk and dawn, they may wake caregivers very early in the morning to be fed with one or more of these behaviors.

Reasons for the Behavior

- A caregiver may get out of bed and feed their cat, but go back to sleep until their alarm rings. However, this human behavior of feeding the cat teaches the cat to continue to wake them early for food since the cat is inadvertently rewarded for this behavior by getting the food when they want it.

Solutions

- As cats are hunters and foragers, it's best to take the human out of the feeding equation.
- Use a timed, automated feeder or treat dispenser that can toss one dry kibble at a time in different directions and that opens just before the cat would normally wake the caregiver.
- The timed, automated treat dispenser simulates normal hunting and feeding behaviors, which is very rewarding for the cat and will keep them busy, allowing caregivers to get their desired sleep.

Vocalizing Frequently for Attention

Cats primarily use vocalizations to communicate with caregivers but rely on more subtle signs for communicating with other cats (e.g., smell, pheromones, subtle visual cues). They may vocalize to seek attention, particularly during specific times of day, such as when caregivers return home after a long day of work.

Reasons for the Behavior

- This behavior most commonly occurs because the individual cat's needs have not been met, especially Pillars 3 (provide opportunity for play and predatory behavior) and 4 (provide positive, consistent and predictable human-cat social interaction) (see *2013 AAFP/ISFM Environmental Needs Guidelines* and *2024 AAFP Intercat Tension Guidelines: Recognition, Prevention, and Management* for the Five Pillars of a Feline

Healthy Environment). Some diseases can cause increased vocalization (e.g., hyperthyroidism, hypertension, pain, sensory loss [e.g., hearing loss], cognitive dysfunction). ***Seek medical attention if vocalization increases, or if this is a new behavior.***

Solutions

- In addition to meeting the individual cat's needs, it is important to ensure positive and predictable human-cat interactions at consistent times daily to help mitigate this attention-seeking behavior.
- This approach does not need to be based on specific times, but rather a routine schedule when caregivers typically have more time.
 - For example, cats need interactive play at least twice daily, and this, and other positive human-cat interactions, can be scheduled before and after work, or in the evening and before bedtime
- Rewarding calm and quiet behaviors with preferred treats and attention is an effective way to teach a cat a new, desirable behavior to replace the undesirable behavior.
- If the cat vocalizes at specific times, redirect their behavior before it starts, offering an alternative activity to prevent vocalization (see example above for "Waking Caregivers Early").

Getting on the Counter

Cats often jump onto counters or tables because they may lack suitable perches near their humans, or because they have learned through classical conditioning (see How Cats Learn section of this Toolkit) that the counter is associated with food.

Reasons for the Behavior

- Perhaps a caregiver has given their cat bits of human food either while on or from the counter (e.g., tossing a treat from the counter to the floor, hoping to entice them down), but these human behaviors inadvertently reward the cat's behavior.
- Cats may also get onto the counter so they can be close to the person.
- As solitary hunters and scavengers, cats find counters rewarding because they have learned they can obtain food there.

- Even if a caregiver yells, squirts water, or uses a deterrent such as a scat mat (which will likely cause fear-anxiety and additional undesirable behaviors), the cat will continue to jump onto the counter because the food reward outweighs the aversive experience.

Solutions

- The most effective strategy is to replace punishment with positive reinforcement of desirable behaviors.
- Never leave human food on the counter or other accessible surfaces.
- Instead, provide high, desirable perches at a level the cat can see the person working in the kitchen, but not jump from the perch to the counter. Provide at least one warm option as cats usually prefer warmth, such as a sunny window or a safely heated commercial cat bed or mat (not a heating pad, which can cause burns). Use treats to reinforce the cat's use of the perch.
- You can also train the cat with luring and capturing, rewarding them whenever they choose the perch instead of the counter (see Positive Reinforcement Techniques to Prevent Unwanted Behaviors section of this Toolkit for more information on these tools).

Bitting

A cat may bite or scratch to protect themselves if they are in pain or feeling sick, as human interaction may cause more discomfort. Veterinary attention is needed to rule out medical problems and to address human safety. Punishment can lead to fear of people and potentially more biting or scratching behaviors, and is never appropriate. The common causes of a cat biting are play biting, biting with petting, and biting with intense frustration.

PLAY BITING

Caregivers often think it's cute to move their hands and feet for kittens to nip at. This human behavior teaches the cat that play biting is acceptable, but this learned play behavior may continue when cats are adults, causing pain and possible injury.

Solutions

- It is recommended to replace hand play with play sessions using a toy on a wand or another object (i.e., toys that can be tossed down a hall to elicit chasing), a minimum of twice daily to satisfy the cat's hunting instincts and to keep hands out of reach.

- If a cat still tries to nip at feet as people walk through the home, recommend redirecting the “hunting” to a toy by carrying a dangling wand toy when walking through the home for the cat to learn the appropriate behavior.
- Educate caregivers that object play should continue routinely a minimum of twice daily, regardless of the cat’s age, as this simulates hunting behavior, satisfying an important feline environmental need. These sessions can be short bursts of a few minutes to mimic hunting.

BITING WITH PETTING

Even if a cat wants to be petted and enjoys it for a while, if petted in an undesirable location or too long, too quickly, or too vigorously, they may then turn and bite with the goal of stopping the overpetting.

Solutions

- Cats prefer petting over the facial glands instead of other body parts, with the caregiver positioned to the side of them instead of in front (see Pillar 4 of the 2013 AAFP/ISFM *Environmental Needs Guidelines* and the 2022 AAFP/ISFM *Cat Friendly Veterinary Interaction Guidelines: Approach and Handling Techniques*).
- For cats who bite with petting, the safest facial glands to pet over initially are the temporal glands (between the ears and eyes) because they are furthest from the mouth. Educate caregivers to both position themselves and pet from the side.
- Educate caregivers about how cats prefer short and frequent interactions rather than long ones, with slow petting, pausing periodically to see if the cat wants more, which prevents frustration (see video – How to Interact with Your Cat | The Battersea Way).
- Petting the belly is generally not appropriate and can lead to people being bitten. Cats may expose their belly as a calm and relaxed greeting behavior, but the cat is not asking to be petted there.

BITING WITH INTENSE FRUSTRATION

An even more serious problem is biting with frustration.

Reasons for this Behavior

- This usually occurs when a cat sees an outdoor cat, or if there is physical conflict between household cats, and the caregiver tries to intervene or comfort a cat.

- The cat is highly frustrated and aroused as they cannot reach the cat outdoors, or the household conflict was abruptly stopped, and they redirect their bite onto the person.
- This is a normal response to the frustration, not a bad behavior, even though it is dangerous. The cat does not want to bite the person, but is still aroused and feeling unsafe, and unintentionally biting the person.

Solutions

- Caregiver behavior should be redirected to never approach or pick up a highly aroused cat, but rather to intervene with a visual barrier.
- Good examples are placing a large piece of cardboard or opaque (not clear) plastic between household cats or a privacy film on windows or patio doors where outdoor cats come to the home (see *2024 AAFP Intercat Tension Guidelines: Recognition, Prevention, and Management* for more information on protecting human safety, and managing intercat tension between household cats or an outdoor cat frustrating an indoor cat).

House-soiling or Marking

One of the least desired behaviors for caregivers is house-soiling or marking.

First: Determine if There Is a Medical Cause

- As underlying medical problems are common, a thorough history, examination with orthopedic assessment, and diagnostics should be performed. In addition to obtaining a baseline dependent on the cat's life stage (see *2021 AAHA/AAFP Feline Life Stage Guidelines*), the following is indicated:
 - If urine soiling is occurring, a urinary ultrasound, urine culture, and other diagnostics as needed are required (the urinalysis is included in the baseline). These diagnostics are necessary to rule out uroliths and other bladder abnormalities, and to identify stress-related feline idiopathic cystitis, also known as bladder pain syndrome (see *2014 AAFP/ISFM Guidelines for Diagnosing and Solving House-soiling Behavior in Cats*), or diarrhea or constipation and their etiologies
 - If it is fecal soiling, the assessment of fecal consistency, checking for parasites, and other diagnostics as needed are required

Next: Are Environmental Needs Being Met?

- If medical conditions are ruled out, the cause is feline distress within the cat's physical and/or social environment.
- Instead of punishment or the use of aversives, which can increase a cat's distress and worsen undesirable behaviors, it is best to address the cat's environmental needs.
- This includes using the optimal litter and placing litter boxes in appropriate locations for each cat, cleaning soiled areas with recommended enzyme breakdown products (see *2014 AAFP/ISFM Guidelines for Diagnosing and Solving House-soiling Behavior in Cats* and the *AAFP House-Soiling Guideline Brief*), and minimizing the individual's stressors.
- Ensure that litter boxes are placed in different locations in the home, with at least one box per floor to allow easy exit and entry, and to minimize potential blocking access to boxes by another cat or other species (see *2024 AAFP Intercat Tension Guidelines: Recognition, Prevention, and Management* for more information about intercat tension and blocking behavior).

If the house-soiling is secondary to feline idiopathic cystitis, manage the condition both medically and by modifying the physical and social environment to minimize all stressors within the home. Additional diagnostics and management are indicated if there are recurrences. A referral to a board-certified veterinary behaviorist, a PhD in animal behavior, or a veterinarian with additional training in feline behavior is indicated if meeting the environmental needs is insufficient to resolve the problem.

Undesirable Scratching

Scratching is a normal cat behavior that serves multiple functions, including marking their territory and maintaining nail health. Cats prefer to scratch or mark in prominent areas, which may lead to furniture or carpet scratching. This often occurs when they wake up or are near windows and doors. Increased scratching behavior is a sign of distress. Punishment will increase undesirable scratching and must be avoided. The FelineVMA strongly opposes declawing, which can lead to both acute and chronic pain and undesirable behavior changes.

Solutions

- Most cats prefer vertical scratching surfaces; others prefer horizontal surfaces. A caregiver may provide several options to learn what an individual cat prefers. A cat's preference may change as they get older; for example, a senior cat is likely to change their preference from vertical to horizontal surfaces.

- Use treats, toys, or preferred human attention to entice and reward the cat's use of scratching posts or other scratchers through positive reinforcement training.
- Resolve the undesirable behavior by recommending the caregiver provide sturdy and tall scratching posts or cat trees with sisal rope or other preferred scratching materials in the location(s) they are scratching.
- Additionally, if the cat has already learned to scratch the sofa or carpet, apply a carpet or furniture protector, such as plastic commercial sofa protectors adhered onto the sofa (do not use double-sided sticky tape as a deterrent, as punishment must be avoided).
- Covering the area with a throw blanket(s) may also be used to aid in protecting furniture.
- Cats like to scratch when they wake up, so keeping an appropriate scratching surface near the cat's preferred resting spot is helpful.
- See the FelineVMA Claw Friendly Educational Toolkit for additional detailed information.

RECOMMEND A MEDICAL ASSESSMENT IF A CAT IS:

- Showing any changes in their usual behavior(s).
- Demonstrating increased vocalization.
- Biting or scratching people.
- Urinating or defecating outside the litter box (soiling or marking).
- Exhibiting chronic anxiety or compulsive behaviors.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **No Disciplining:** Avoid reprimanding or physical discipline to punish behavior.
- **Meet Needs:** Ensure the cat's environmental needs are met to allow for normal, instinctual behaviors in preferred locations.
- **Redirect and Reinforce:** Redirect and positively reinforce desired behaviors.
- **Change Habits:** Adjust your own habits if you are inadvertently rewarding undesirable behaviors.
- **Have Patience:** Remember that changing unwanted behaviors takes time and consistency.



CLIENT EDUCATION

Positive reinforcement is an important way to foster a fun and healthy human-cat relationship. Here are some resources you can offer to help caregivers build their bond with their cat(s).

CLIENT HANDOUTS

- Cat Training Techniques for Caregivers
- Preventing Unwanted Cat Behaviors

CLIENT BROCHURES

- Are You Thinking of Getting Another Cat(s)?
- Visiting your Veterinarian
- How to Feed a Cat
- Alternatives to Declawing
- Feline House-soiling
- Your Cat's Environmental Needs

ENSURING YOUR CAT'S ENVIRONMENTAL NEEDS

- Catfriendly.com – What Your Cat Needs to Feel Secure
- Catfriendly.com – How to Keep Your Cat Calm

BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION

- Catfriendly.com – Intercat Tension
- Catfriendly.com – Vocalizing

TRAINING

- Catfriendly.com – Preventing Unwanted Behaviors
- Catfriendly.com – Cat Training Techniques for Caregivers

PLAYING & HANDLING

- Catfriendly.com – How to Pet & Handle Cats
- Catfriendly.com – Playing With Your Cat
- Video – How to Interact with Your Cat
- Video – Understanding Cat Body Language

CATS & KIDS

- Catfriendly.com – Developing a Joyful Bond Between Kids & Cats

MANAGING HOUSE-SOILING

- Catfriendly.com – Not Using the Litter Box

REDIRECTING SCRATCHING

- Catfriendly.com – Scratching

CARRIER & VET VISITS

- Catfriendly.com – Choosing the Perfect Cat Carrier
- Catfriendly.com – Getting Your Cat to the Veterinarian

INTRODUCING A NEW CAT

- Catfriendly.com – Intercat Tension
- Catfriendly.com – Introducing a New Cat Into Your Home
- Catfriendly.com – Are You Thinking of Getting Another Cat(s)?

HARNESS & LEASH TRAINING

- Catfriendly.com – Teaching Your Cat to Walk on a Harness and Leash
- Video – How to Train Your Cat to Walk on a Harness & Leash

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Feline Veterinary Medical Association. Behavior Modification Recommendations for Multiple-Cat Households. 2024. Download Link.

Feline Veterinary Medical Association. Claw Friendly Educational Toolkit. 2020. <https://catvets.com/claw-friendly-toolkit>.

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GLOSSARY

Glossary of Terminology Used in the Positive Reinforcement Training Toolkit

Associative learning

Learning requires forming associations between events or specific stimuli.

Aversive stimuli

Events or actions that provoke protective emotions (e.g., fear-anxiety, pain, frustration) and can hinder learning and damage the human–cat relationship; their use is discouraged in handling or training.

Capturing

Reinforcing a behavior the cat naturally offers on their own (e.g., sitting), so the behavior becomes more likely in the future; a form of operant conditioning via positive reinforcement.

Classical conditioning

Learning based on associations between stimuli that occur without the cat's voluntary action (e.g., the sight of a needle predicting a pinch leading the sight alone to trigger a protective response).

Conditioned reinforcer

A neutral signal (e.g., click, word, or hand signal) first paired with a reward so it reliably "marks" the exact moment of the desired behavior when immediate delivery of the primary reward is not possible.

Cooperative care

Training that enables a cat to willingly participate in their own care (at home or in the clinic) by teaching skills like targeting, stationing, positioning, or offering a limb, reducing the need for physical restraint.

Distress

A state where protective emotions exceed coping ability, interfering with learning; indicated by body language changes (e.g., crouching, piloerection, ear position, pupil dilation).

Dysbiosis

An alteration in the microbiota.

Engaging (positive) emotions

Emotional states associated with reward-seeking (e.g., predation, seeking treats, social interaction) that support positive-reinforcement training and cooperation.

Estepimeletic behaviors

Care-soliciting behaviors in cats.

Habituation

A form of non-associative learning in which repeated exposure to a safe, irrelevant stimulus leads the cat to ignore it.

Luring

Using a preferred reward (e.g., treat, toy) to guide the cat into performing a behavior; helpful but may be less effective than shaping/capturing for complex behaviors.

Microbiota

The gut/skin microbial communities influence metabolic and immune/inflammatory responses and, in turn, affect physical and behavioral health.

Nociception

Perception of noxious stimuli; pain has both emotional (protective) and sensory components and can exacerbate fear-anxiety and impair learning.

Non-associative learning

Learning that does not require forming associations between events or stimuli (e.g., habituation, sensitization).

Object play

Typical feline play that mimics hunting (chasing, pouncing, biting, clawing of "prey" objects); varies with life stage and individual preference.

Operant conditioning

Learning where the cat associates voluntary actions with their consequences; positive reinforcement (adding something pleasant) increases the targeted behavior.

Pheromonal marking

Deposition of scent via urine, feces, or rubbing that communicates presence, status, and emotional state and can have a calming effect in the environment.

Positive reinforcement

Adding a pleasant outcome (e.g., treat, play, preferred social contact) contingent on a behavior so the frequency of this behavior increases; recommended as the first-line training method.

Preference assessment

Presenting multiple potential rewards and observing which the cat engages with most to identify that individual's most effective reinforcers at that particular time.

Primary reinforcement

Delivering the reward directly after the behavior without a conditioned marker in between; can be paired with shaping, luring, and targeting.

Protective (negative) emotions

Fear-anxiety, pain, and frustration that prompt inhibition, avoidance, or repelling responses; chronic activation impairs learning and welfare.

Scratching

A species-typical behavior for claw maintenance and scent/visual marking; preferences vary by substrate (e.g., rope, cardboard) and orientation (vertical/horizontal/angled), and may change with age.

Sensitization

A form of non-associative learning in which exposure to a threatening stimulus heightens fear-anxiety and responsiveness to that stimulus.

Shaping

Teaching a behavior through small, incremental steps, reinforcing successive approximations until the full behavior is performed.

Social play

Play Play that occurs between cats with an acceptable degree of reciprocity.

CAT TRAINING TECHNIQUES FOR CAREGIVERS

Training your cat using positive reinforcement techniques can improve their behavior, reduce stress, and strengthen your bond. These easy-to-follow techniques use positive reinforcement to help cats learn in a way that is comfortable and rewarding for them.

Finding Your Cat's Preferred Reward

- This could be food, treat, a toy, or social praise.
- Keep your cat's favorite treats ready during training so you can reward quickly.
- If social praise is your cat's preferred reward, praise verbally in a soft voice and pet over preferred areas.
- For cats who prefer play, use a favorite toy as the reward.

Timing is Everything

- Reward your cat as soon as possible after the behavior.
- If there's a delay, use a conditioned reinforcer (like a click or social praise) to mark the behavior.
- This helps your cat connect the action with the reward.
- Fear reduces a cat's ability to learn. Only train your cat when calm and relaxed.

Conditional Reinforcers

- A clicker, sound, or word (like "Good kitty!") is paired with giving a reward.
- Over time, your cat learns that the sound means a reward is coming.
- Use it to mark the exact moment your cat does the desired behavior.
- It is helpful if you cannot give a preferred reward right away (e.g., training to give a high-five).

TIPS:

- If the click is too loud, wrap the clicker or keep it in your pocket.
- Social praise (like "Good kitty!") can be used instead of a clicker.

Shaping

- Shaping breaks a behavior into tiny steps, and a reward is provided at each step.
- It can help your cat learn complex actions gradually.

Example: Teaching a cat to use a cat door

Reward each step when your cat:

1. Looks at the door
2. Moves toward it
3. Stands near it
4. Touches it
5. Puts paw through
6. Puts head through
7. Moves halfway through
8. Walks through

Luring

- Use a treat or toy to guide your cat's movement.
- It can help your cat perform a behavior by following the reward.

Example: Teaching a cat to use a cat door

Place food near the cat door to guide your cat toward it.



Use a toy to lure your cat through the door.

Note: Luring is helpful for starting training, but shaping and capturing are better for teaching complex behaviors.

Targeting

- Teach your cat to touch an object (like a target stick or chopstick) with their nose.

Steps:

1. Hold the stick near your cat's nose → reward when touched.
2. Move the stick farther away → reward each time the cat touches it.
3. Increase the distance slowly.

TIP: Put soft food or a lickable treat on the stick to encourage touching.

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CAT TRAINING TECHNIQUES FOR CAREGIVERS

Capturing

- Capturing is rewarding a behavior your cat does on their own, without being guided or lured.

Example: Teaching a cat to sit before meals

- Reward behaviors you want to teach (like sitting before meals).
- When your cat sits naturally, say "Good job!" and give a treat or toy right after.
- Reinforcing this behavior helps your cat learn to repeat it.

TIP: Watch for moments your cat often does the behavior you want to teach and be ready to reward your cat.

Improving Cat's Welfare

- Training can also support your cat's natural behaviors, which improves their wellbeing and reduces unwanted actions.

Example: Supporting natural behaviors

- Reinforce scratching on a post to prevent furniture damage.
- Train your cat to walk on a harness and leash and/or use a cat door for safe outdoor time (e.g., to access a catio).
- Encourage problem-solving through training to reduce stress and boredom.

TIP: Rewarding behaviors that let cats express themselves naturally helps them feel more confident and content.

Cooperative Care

- Cooperative care means training your cat to voluntarily participate in their own care, like entering a carrier, offering a paw, or staying still for an examination. Remember to only train your cat when healthy, not in pain, and not showing fear or stress.

Why It Matters:

- Reduces the need for physical restraint.
- Minimizes fear-anxiety.
- Helps cats feel more in control.

How It Can Help:

- Targeting – Guide your cat into a carrier or onto a scale.
- Luring – Use a treat or toy to lead your cat into position.
- Capturing and Shaping – Reinforce natural behaviors like stretching or opening the mouth, then build on them gradually.

Putting Behaviors on Cue

- Once your cat does a behavior often, add a word or signal.

Example: Teaching your cat to sit

1. Wait for your cat to sit.
2. Say "Sit" as they sit and immediately reward.
3. Repeat several times.
4. Start saying "Sit" before they sit.
5. Your cat will learn to sit when you say the word!

Key Takeaways

- Finding the Right Reward: Food isn't always the best reward—some cats prefer toys or human interaction.
- Importance of Preferred Rewards: Try different options and watch how your cat responds. What they like can change from day to day.
- Timing is Everything: Give the reward right after the behavior you want to reinforce.
- Training Tools: Use tools like a clicker or social praise to "mark" the behavior when you can't give a reward right away.
- Shaping: Teach a complex behavior by breaking it into small steps and rewarding each one.
- Luring: Use a reward to guide your cat's movement. This works best for simple behaviors.
- Targeting: Train your cat to touch an object, like a stick, which can help guide their actions.
- Capturing: Reward a behavior your cat already does naturally, like sitting.
- Cooperative Care: Train your cat to take part in their own care. This can reduce fear-anxiety and avoid physical restraint.

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Remember: Every cat is different—some may learn quickly, while others take more time. Be patient and keep training with positive reinforcement techniques! For more information, visit catfriendly.com/training



Cats may display behaviors that are considered undesirable by caregivers; however, many of these actions are natural and instinctual for the cat. By gaining a better understanding of the reasons behind these behaviors and applying positive reinforcement techniques, caregivers can effectively guide their cats toward more acceptable alternatives in a compassionate and supportive way.

WHY DISCIPLINE DOES NOT WORK

Disciplining cats with yelling, squirt bottles, or physical punishment can:

- Increase fear and stress
- Lead to more unwanted behaviors
- Damage your bond with your cat
- Make it harder for your cat to learn new habits

Instead of punishment, change your behavior and use positive reinforcement

WHEN TO CALL YOUR VETERINARIAN

Some behaviors may be caused by health problems. Get a medical checkup if your cat:

- Acts differently than usual
- Meows more than normal
- Bites or scratches people
- Urinates or defecates outside the litter box
- Shows signs of anxiety or obsessive behavior



COMMON BEHAVIORS AND WHAT YOU CAN DO

Meowing for Attention

Why it happens: Cats meow or vocalize to communicate with people, especially when they feel ignored or bored.

Solutions:

- Play with your cat with a wand toy at least twice a day
- Keep a consistent routine for petting and attention
- Reward quiet, calm behavior with your cat's preferred treats
- If it happens at certain times of the day, redirect before the meowing starts (like using a toy or feeder)

Jumping on Counters

Why it happens: Cats may jump up for food or to be near you. If they get food on the counter—even once—they will keep trying.

Solutions:

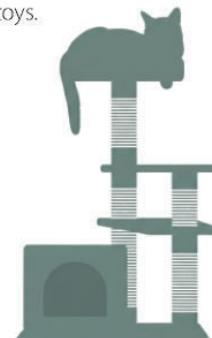
- Keep counters clean and free of food
- Give your cat high perches nearby (but not close enough to jump from)
- Use warm spots like sunny windows or heated cat beds (not a heating pad, which can cause burns)
- Put treats on the perch to entice and reward desired behavior
- Train by giving your cat treats when they choose the perch instead of the counter

Biting Hands or Feet

Why it happens: Some cats learn that biting during play is okay if hands or feet are used as toys.

Solutions:

- See a veterinarian to rule out pain or illness
- Never play with hands or feet—use toys instead
- Play twice a day with wand toys
- If your cat bites feet, carry a wand toy to redirect their “hunt”
- Keep play sessions short and fun to mimic real hunting



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Waking You Up Early

Why it happens: Cats naturally eat at dawn and dusk. If you feed them when they wake you, they learn to keep doing it.

Solutions:

- Use a timed feeder or treat dispenser that opens before they wake you
- Choose one that tosses kibble to mimic hunting
- This keeps your cat busy and lets you sleep

Biting During Petting

Why it happens: Even if a cat enjoys petting, too much petting or petting in an area the cat does not like, can lead to biting.

Solutions:

- Cats may bite if they are sick or in pain. If this is a new behavior, contact your veterinarian
- Pet gently and slowly, mostly around the face (temporal glands between eyes and ears)
- Sit beside your cat, not in front
- Keep interactions short
- Pause often to see if your cat wants more
- Avoid petting the belly

Biting from Frustration

Why it happens: Cats may bite when they are upset—like seeing another cat outdoors or after a fight with a housemate.

Solutions:

- Never pick up or approach an upset cat
- Use visual barriers like cardboard or privacy film on windows
- Separate cats with dividers that they cannot see through, and not your hands (e.g., a large pillow or piece of cardboard)
- Only interact with the cat when they are calm again (~1-2 hours)

House-soiling or Marking

Why it happens: It could be medical or from something in their environment (e.g., stress-related).

Solutions:

- Rule out medical issues with your veterinarian
- Provide enough litter boxes (one per cat + one extra, on each floor)
- Place boxes in quiet, easy-to-access spots
- Reduce stress in the home and meet your cat's environmental needs
- If problems continue, ask your veterinarian about a behavior specialist

Scratching Furniture

Why it happens: Scratching is normal for cats. They do it to mark territory and keep their claws healthy.

Solutions:

- Offer vertical and horizontal scratchers to find your cat's preference
- Place scratchers near windows, doors, and resting spots
- Use treats or toys to reward scratching on the right surface
- Cover furniture with protectors or blankets
- Never punish your cat—instead, redirect and reward



FINAL TIPS AND KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Contact Your Veterinarian:** Changes in your cat's behavior can be caused by underlying medical problems.
- **No Disciplining:** Avoid yelling, spraying, or using physical punishment. These actions increase fear and make behavior worse.
- **Meet Needs:** Make sure your cat's environment supports natural behaviors like scratching, climbing, hiding, and hunting.
- **Give Them Choice:** Understand your cat's needs and give them choices.
- **Redirect and Reinforce:** Guide your cat toward better behaviors and reward them when they make good choices.
- **Change Habits:** Notice if your actions are encouraging and unwanted behavior (like feeding when meowed at) and adjust.
- **Have Patience:** Behavior change takes time, consistency, and patience. Stick with it and celebrate small wins!

For more information, visit catfriendly.com/training

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