

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 that occurs between cats with an acceptable degree of reciprocity.