

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.

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530.582.7830
www.townoftruckee.com

Humane Society of Truckee-Tahoe
530.587.5948
www.hstt.org