



Training Cats

Most people understand that dogs can be trained, but did you know that cats can be trained too? The process is different for both animals, but the concepts are the same. By using reinforcement (something to increase a behaviour) and punishment (something to decrease a behaviour), cats can learn to do some pretty cool things! We prefer reinforcement only and DO NOT CONDONE punishment when training animals.

Natural Behaviours

Cats exhibit natural behaviours that differ from the behaviours of dogs, which means the training techniques and teachable behaviours should be different, at least initially. For example, dogs naturally 'sit' frequently, making this an ideal behaviour to teach first. This helps them understand that if they do what we are asking, they get something good and will try to figure out what we are asking for in order to get the reinforcer (often a treat). Picking the first trick to teach a cat will depend greatly on the individual cat. Try to pick a behaviour that is naturally occurring before asking for it on cue, like if the cat often uses her paws to explore things, try teaching a 'high five' first. Once she figures out that when she does something you like she gets a reward, she will try harder to figure it out next time so you can teach more challenging things like 'roll over' if you want. Cats are very smart, so if you are using the right techniques, they can learn so many cool tricks.

Reinforcers

Before you begin training, trial some different reinforcers to see which ones your cat prefers. A positive reinforcer is anything that, when given to the cat, will increase the likelihood of a behaviour reoccurring. Some examples of positive reinforcers are treats, physical attention and play time with favourite toys. Every cat is different, so just because one cat loves food does not mean all cats love food. It also helps to pair the reinforcer with an auditory cue (a marker), like a clicker or your voice, to make sure you capture the exact moment the cat performs the trick.

Delivery Method

Cats are finicky, cautious and curious by nature, so they may take longer to consume the reward if it is new (and food). Some cats refuse to eat treats from a hand, and insist on them being on the floor, for example. They may sniff and paw at the reward for a while before consuming it, so you may not be able to do as many repetitions of the trick within the training timeframe. Do not ask them to repeat the trick until they are ready, have consumed the reward and have re-focused on you.

Timing!

Timing is SO important when training any animal. The marker (clicker or voice) is meant to let the cat know the EXACT moment she has done something right, and that she can expect the reward to follow

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shortly. This is especially important for cats since they may take longer to consume the reward. For example, if you are target training your cat you would mark (with a clicker OR voice cue) the **SECOND** she touches the target (can be anything visible like a hand or a stick with something on the end) with whichever body part you are asking for (foot, whole body, nose...).

Go Slow, Don't Push

If your cat isn't responding to the training, take a break and try to determine why she is not able to focus. It may be the reinforcer isn't valuable enough, or that she doesn't feel safe in the space. Ensure she always has access to water and a litter box while training, and that there are no distractions in the environment. If you have other pets, keep them occupied in another area so your cat doesn't have to worry about them. Make sure you are calm and focused as well, cats are very empathetic and can feel our emotions, so if you, as the trainer, are frustrated, your cat may be as well.

Techniques

The training technique you use for cats depends greatly on the individual cat. Some cats can be trained by 'luring' them into the desired positions while others prefer to figure out what you want by trial and error. To lure a cat, simply place the reinforcer (treat or toy) at their nose and, like a magnet, slowly move it to guide the cat to the place or into the position you would like. Do not apply ANY pressure (pushing their bum down to get them to sit) to the cat, instead, let the reinforcer guide them. The second they are in the desired position, mark with your marker (clicker or voice) and offer the reward. Some cats do not respond to this method, so you must 'catch them in the act' (this is called 'capturing') to reward and reinforce the behaviour. If you want your cat to go to her tree on command, wait until she is in the tree, add the cue 'tree' (or whatever you would like to call it), mark with your marker and offer a reward. After a few repetitions, your cat should understand that they get rewards when they are in the tree and will quickly determine they only get treats when you give them the cue 'tree' instead of every time they go to the tree without you giving them the cue.

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