



Feline Training

Introduction

Training any animal merely requires understanding the principles of learning. Next, taking the individual species differences into account, a program can be developed to train the animal. The final step is setting up the environment for the cat to succeed – or to put it another way, for it to be more likely to perform the desired responses. Training is about providing information on what you want the cat to do and making it easy for him to do it.

Principles of Learning

Positive reinforcement is something that is used to cause a behavior to increase in frequency. Positive reinforcement is usually food, toys, or play, that when given is pleasurable and results in a behavior being repeated.

Punishment is usually the application of something unpleasant in response to an undesirable behavior to prevent that behavior from continuing or recurring. Punishment almost never works in cats. Using punishment will often make the cat afraid of you, completely destroying your trusting relationship with the cat. And if the cat doesn't trust you, you have no chance of training it. Positive reinforcement is much more effective in changing unwanted behaviors.

Positive Reinforcement

The most commonly used positive reinforcement is a food reward, although play and attention can also be used. The reinforcement is important to let the cat know that it has done something right. For cats, food may or may not be the best reinforcement. The food reward must be very desirable, and the cat cannot just have finished a meal.

Usually if the cat is not rewarded for a behavior within 2 seconds of it happening, it will not associate the reward with the actual behavior. You are watching for a behavior you like and then reinforcing it when it happens. Verbal reinforcement phrases like “good kitty” or “yes”, is beneficial to be paired with the food reward, so the food can be phased out later.

Cats can also be trained by using a “target,” such as a stick with a ball on the end. The stick is held near the animal, and when the cat touches it with its nose, the pet receives a praise and a food reward. Once this behavior is clearly learned, the target can be used to guide the cat to do many tasks, such as jump on or off a stool or through a hoop, all of which can later be put under verbal control.

Why Punishment Doesn't Work

Punishment is difficult to use because timing is essential to obtaining the desired result (a decrease in the unwanted behavior). For example, if you come home and find the cat has shredded the curtains in your absence, pushing the cat's nose into the fabric and spanking it will do no good whatsoever after the fact, other than to confuse your cat and possibly make him afraid of you. The only way punishment can work effectively, is if you catch the cat in the act of the undesirable behavior, and the punishment is given within 1 to 2 seconds of the behavior occurring. Punishment that occurs after





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the behavior happens also doesn't give the cat any information on how further punishment could be avoided. Spraying the cat with water from a squirt bottle is considered a type of punishment. Cats notoriously dislike water, so a squirt bottle can be a quick harmless way to discourage a behavior, if you catch him in the act.

With cats, you will need to replace the unwanted behavior, with the desirable behavior in order to change it. If you catch the cat in an unwanted act, an appropriate punishment would be to sharply and loudly say his name, along with the sharp clap of your hands to distract him from the unwanted behavior – then promptly direct him to the desirable behavior (taking him away from the curtains and putting him on his scratching post, then positively reinforcement him for being on the post).

Remember that striking your cat in any way will only make him afraid of you, destroying your trusting relationship. Physical punishment can also cause anxiety, fear, and aggression.

Command Training

Coming when Called by Name

First, you have to teach him to move toward you when you call his name. To do this, use a food reward held in your hand and slowly pass it by the cat's face so he can smell it. As the cat begins to show interest, move the food a bit further so the cat has to follow it, as calling his name as you do so. After the cat moves a short distance, let him eat the food. Repeat this sequence, having the cat come further each time before food is given. Also try starting in another room and call the cat. Once the cat reliably and repeatedly comes when called, begin to phase out the food, using it only intermittently. Use praise, petting, or playing as reinforcement instead of the food, but the cat will continue to come in anticipation of a reward. Even after the cat seems to learn this trick by heart, continue to positively reinforce coming when called throughout his life (with petting or praise) to reaffirm the behavior.

Sit

A cat already knows how to sit – what you want to do is put that action under verbal control. Start by watching your cat or even calling him to you and waiting for him to sit down. The instant that he does, drop a food reward. If he doesn't sit down and continues to circle you, you can try holding a food reward over his head while he's standing and slowly move it back toward his rear, he will automatically sit (instead of backing up), to see the food better – then give the food reward. Then back up and wait again. The cat is likely to approach, and when he sits, drop another reward. As you repeat this scenario, the length of time it takes the cat to sit down decreases as he learns that sitting results in a reward. The next step is to add in command "sit" to the learned action. As the cat approaches, just before he sits, say "sit." When he does sit, give a reward. Soon he will learn that "sit" means put your bottom down and you will get a food treat. Then start phasing out the food as described above.

Stopping Unwanted Behaviors

You will still be using positive reinforcement to stop unwanted behaviors. As described above, punishment doesn't work well with cats to stop a behavior. You will need to replace the undesirable behavior with the desirable one, and positively reinforcement the desirable one.



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For example, if you want to train your cat to stay off the counter, first make sure you don't leave out any enticing tidbits that will reward him jumping up there. Also, he may also like being in an elevated position (which is normal cat behavior), so putting cat trees or other elevated places around the house will give him less incentive to be on the counter. Praise him whenever he's on the cat tree, so he knows this is an acceptable place for him to be. If you catch him on the counter, make a loud noise (such as a sharp clap) to get his attention, then promptly remove him from the counter, and take him to the desirable spot (cat tree), then praise him or drop a food reward on the cat tree.

Same thing goes with training to use a scratching post instead of the couch. If you catch him in the act of scratching on the couch, make a loud, sharp noise as a distraction to quickly stop the behavior, then immediately redirect him to the post. Praise him and offer a food reward for being near the post. You'll want to make sure you place the scratching post in a high traffic area (so he doesn't have to go to a remote spot of the house to use it), or maybe near a favorite sleeping spot (cats usually always scratch after a nice, long nap, and if the post is handy, he'll be more inclined to use it). Play with him near the post, or rub catnip on it to make it more fun. Even after he has learned to use it, keep praise him verbally and with some petting to constantly reinforce his use of the post.

Conclusion

Understanding how cats learn and their motivations for performing certain behaviors will help anyone begin to train a cat. If you give the cat a reason to learn and use a positive reinforcement reward that relates to him, the training possibilities are almost endless!

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