



## Training Your Cat with Positive Reinforcement

Contrary to what many people believe, cats can be trained just like any other animal. In fact, cats have humans well trained, and we don't even realize it most of the time. When your cat meows and we feed her, or when she jumps up into our lap and we start petting him - these are ways that cats train us, we are positively reinforced because the reward for us is attention from our cat!

Many times, people view their cats as doing 'bad' behaviours in the home. Common complaints are: scratching the couch, jumping up on the kitchen table, chewing the house plants, nipping a hand during petting, etc. When we take the time to tune into these behaviours, we see that they are actually very natural behaviours for cats. The trick is not to punish your kitty but instead observe body language, provide your kitty with appropriate outlets, and teach your kitty what those preferred outlets are using positive reinforcement methods.

Positive reinforcement is a wonderful tool because it greatly improves the cat-human bond through communication that the cat will understand - no spoken words need to be used at all! Simply put, positive reinforcement means **reinforcing** your cat to **repeat** a specific behaviour by **adding or giving** something to him/her (like a treat). Most cats are food-motivated therefore it's usually easy to use food or treats as a reward. Other rewards that can be used are playing with a favorite toy for a few moments, petting, or using sweet talk.

**Training your cat using positive reinforcement** can be useful in many different situations. If your kitty is shy it can be used to encourage social behaviour. It can also be used to teach your kitty to use a scratching post instead of the couch. If your cat doesn't always love being touched or petted, then it can be used to make her more tolerant and accepting of pets. It can also be used to reward calm or quiet behaviour. And best of all, you can use it to teach your kitty some fun tricks!

On the contrary, using punishment when you don't want your cat to do something will only damage your relationship because punishment uses fear and/or pain. This in turn will cause stress and anxiety in your kitty. You may think that tapping your cat's nose when he jumps up on the kitchen counter doesn't actually hurt, however it is an aversive action. This action may keep them from jumping up when you are present, but as soon as you leave the room your cat knows that punishment cannot be doled out and they



then has free reign to jump onto the counter without any consequences. If your cat does something you don't want them to do, the main goal is to distract, disrupt, and redirect. And when you redirect your kitty to an appropriate behaviour, reward them immediately to increase the chance of them repeating that specific action in the future.

**Rewarding for appropriate behaviours** is very important in the early phases of training. Consistent rewards will reinforce and ensure that the behaviour will be repeated again in the future. However, you don't have to continue issuing rewards forever. Once your cat starts performing a certain behaviour reliably most of the time (example: using the scratching post over the couch), you can start phasing out the reward using a variable schedule. In this phase of training, you will make your kitty guess when she will receive a reward for scratching the post which in turn will make it more reinforcing. This is similar to slot machines for humans – if we were to get a penny for every pull of the lever it would cease to be rewarding pretty quickly. We want the big payoff, so we'll keep pulling to see if maybe the big reward will happen the next time, or maybe the time after that...

If you would like to learn more about training your cat you can always call our behaviour helpline at 403-723-6019 or book a consultation at <https://www.calgaryhumane.ca/services/pet-training/>