

Some Thoughts on Cat Training

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In a nutshell:

A cat is an animal, not a little human in a furry four legged body. Accepting this fact is the key to making progress with cat training. Rather than somehow diminishing the relationship, it sets the foundation for a deep, rewarding and real bond between you and your cat.

Cats do stuff because there is something in it for them. Whether you admire cats for their “independence” or hate the arrogant little flea bags, if you want them to behave a certain way for you, you have to accept that basic truth.

Controlling the cat’s food is the easiest and quickest way to convince the cat that it “wants” to do something. Remarkable results can be achieved with just praise and affection, but it is slower. This is especially true if the cat and trainer are “new” to each other.

Animals generally react to the situations they find themselves in. There are very few truly “bad” animals. The humans have the brains, set the rules, provide the food and generally control just about every aspect of a pet’s life. Any change in the relationship has to come from the human!

Always treat cats with kindness and respect. A cat’s response to yelling, hitting and throwing stuff is to try and stay as far away from the unpleasantness as possible. It is not an effective training technique.

The basic steps of clicker training establish a simple “language” between the trainer and the cat. Being able to encourage a cat at the specific moment it does something we like allows a huge range of “tricks” to be learned.

Why do I think training a cat is a good idea?

It is fun, both for you and the cat.

It’s useful to have a cat that comes when it is called or that will go into its carrier when it is time to go to the vet.

A well trained cat is a pleasure to live with. Too often a cat that misbehaves ends up at the pound or on the side of a road watching its family drive away.

How are cats trained?

Rewards: Essentially we get cats to do what we want by rewarding them. The reward is usually a little piece of food, but it can also be praise and affection.

Food: Scandalous as it might sound to some (I'll return to this subject later) food is not left out for the cat to munch on anytime it wants. Instead the cat's daily ration is divided into portions and given at regular mealtimes. A certain amount of food is kept specifically to be used as "treats" during training.

Repetition: As the old saying goes: If you want to learn a new skill there are three things you have to do. The first one is practice. The second one is practice. The third one is practice.

Consistency: Training every single day for two minutes will give better results than spending hours one day but then doing nothing for a week or two.

Be nice! Cats are social and enjoy affection, but they are not pack animals. They don't have an instinctive need to be part of a group. If bad things happen when they are around a certain person or in a certain place, they will stay away. Try to mold your cat's behavior with praise rather than scolding, with affection rather than anger. (I might add that this approach works well with people too!)

Cats hear, see, smell and sense things that humans do not. Cats have instincts that cause them to react in ways that humans do not. Cats do not react to pleasures and hurts, praise and insults the way that humans do. Yet if you take the time to understand what kind of animal your cat is, to try and understand how it might see the world and treat it with love and respect, then the bond that forms is remarkable.

What sorts of things can cats learn to do?

It really depends how much time you want to devote to training. There are several videos posted on the internet that show the sorts of things that cats can learn. How far you take it is up to you.

The nuts and bolts of getting your cat to do what you want:

Here is a basic truth of cat psychology: A cat will not do something unless it is worthwhile (for the cat). It's just the way they are built. You can love it, you can hate it, you can argue, you can call cats "selfish" or "arrogant" or a bunch of other names, you can get angry, you can wish it wasn't so, you can do whatever you want, but until you accept the idea you won't get very far training a cat.

It is just this simple: Make it worth the cat's while and it will (literally) jump through hoops for you. If you don't make it worthwhile the cat won't give you the time of day.

Food motivates us all. We've all got to eat. Wild cats are used to working for their food. They watch the animals they hunt and they notice patterns. They sit still as statues for ages if they need to, or sprint all out when needed, they climb trees or dive under bushes, and some even overcome a cat's normal dislike of water and go fishing! They will do what it takes to get a meal. Our housecats are perfectly capable of working for their food and quite frankly I think they thrive on the challenge.

Instead of leaving a pile of food out for the cat to "graze" on, divide the day's ration of food into portions and feed the cat at regular mealtimes. Hold a small amount of food back to be used as treats during training sessions. For training I just use a few nuggets run of the mill, nothing special dry food.

Feeding correctly sized portions at regular mealtimes has several advantages:

It automatically "trains" the cat to show up at certain times of the day. This is a powerful and useful habit for a housecat to develop. Should a cat accidentally slip "out of bounds" the habit of showing up for meals helps to provide an incentive to come out of hiding and head home?

Another advantage is that if a cat becomes ill and loses its appetite you notice immediately. Catching an illness quickly means a better chance of recovery for the cat and usually much lower vet bills.

Cats that have access to food all the time tend to be pretty finicky eaters (makes sense, they are always full). When the cat needs a medication there is little chance you'll be able to hide it in their food. That means the "fight with Kitty, try to shove a pill down the throat, get scratched, everybody ends up in a bad mood" routine. Whereas a cat that only has food at mealtimes eats enthusiastically and rarely notices that you have "spiked" the dinner dish. Kitty gets the medicine and is thrilled about it! "Please sir, may I have some more!"

Feeding at regular mealtimes naturally lends itself to teaching a cat to come when it is called. Once again, if a cat slips "out of bounds" responding to this command may save its life.

I have heard the argument that making a cat "do stuff" for food is cruel, harmful, demeaning and lots of other (in my opinion) nonsense. My experience has been exactly the opposite. The cats I live with seem to really enjoy training sessions. They show all the signs of a happy and contented cat: Purring, tail in the air, rubbing against things, a spring in their step, head held high and an overall alert and confident body language. I have found that a quick training session will sometimes sooth a cat that is agitated or in a stressful situation.

As I mentioned earlier, hunting requires thought, concentration, patience, cunning and a hefty dose of luck. Working to put "food on the table" is a normal part of a cat's life. As far as I can tell, the cats I live with enjoy learning new tricks and they seem to thrive on the daily routine.

Praise: Cats do respond affection, both verbal and physical. Whether they choose to do a trick because they want to receive affection, or whether the affection just establishes a friendly and collaborative mood I don't know, but lavish praise and lots of affection seems to make training sessions more productive.

Training in general:

Teaching a cat to come when it is called:

Just before mealtime make a loud whistle. Then put food in the cat's dish. Pretty soon your cat will show up when you whistle. Once that is happening regularly, start changing the place where the cat eats. Start out slowly. Maybe you only change to the other side of the room at first. Build up gradually until the cat learns to go to the whistle, wherever it is. It is important that the cat develop the habit of coming to the whistle every time. Moving the feeding place too far too soon, or practicing so often that the cat gets full and loses interest should be avoided.

Why isn't it working? Here are a few things that can go wrong:

One of the most likely is that the cat is being given too much to eat. It hears the whistle and knows what it means, but its tummy is still full, so why bother?

If the food stays in the bowl indefinitely the cat may not bother to answer the whistle immediately. It knows the food will still be there "later" so it wanders over whenever it feels like it. The solution is simple: After a couple of minutes, put the food away. The cat soon learns the protocol.

Note: Please don't worry that "Fluffy" will suffer lasting psychological damage if he or she misses a meal. It would not have been unusual for the cat's wild ancestors to have had a "bad day" hunting and to have missed a meal or two. This ancestral ability to miss a meal once in a while will have been passed down to "Fluffy". Consider also that cats have to fast for 12 to 18 hours when they are anesthetized for dental work or surgery and yet they bounce back just fine, with no permanent aftereffects.

One final point is that being able to command your cat to come to you may save its life someday. If it takes a missed meal or two for the cat to learn a potentially life saving skill, it seems like a worthwhile trade to me!

If the cat seemed to be getting the idea, but isn't doing so well now that you have started moving the feeding place to different parts of the house, just back up a few steps and go a little slower this time. It takes time to learn a new skill.

Perhaps something is distracting or frightening the cat: Most cats don't like loud noises, so if the vacuum cleaner is running, or someone is using a power tool or kids are playing a loud game that involves objects flying through the air and bouncing off the walls, the cat is probably going to stay put!

Maybe the cat doesn't come to the whistle any more because it has learned that after it has finished the food something happens that it doesn't like.

For example: You call your cat into the garage in the morning and then leave it in there all day while you are at work. From the cat's perspective the food is a good thing, but maybe being locked in the garage all day is a bad thing. The cat soon figures out that breakfast is followed by lockdown and decides "No deal!"

In this case, if the cat really did have to spend the day in the garage I would sweeten the deal by having an automatic feeder dispense a little food every couple of hours. I think this would probably change Kitty's attitude about the garage and along with it the reluctance to show up for the whistle. Of course, if the house is heated and the garage is like an icebox, a little food every once in a while is probably not going to persuade Kitty that the garage is the place to be! Cats are not stupid.

Finally: If there is "bad blood" between you and your cat, it may take a while for it to accept the "new and friendly you". If in the past you have constantly scolded the cat and yelled at it and maybe worse, because its behavior upsets you it's not going to forget all that and suddenly come running when you call. However, cats are quick to adapt to a new situation. If lots of nice things start happening to the cat whenever you are around it will learn to trust you. For some more thoughts on earning a cat's trust take a look at "Taming Feral Cats".

I can't guarantee that a cat that escapes will come when it is called, no matter how well trained it is. In a dangerous situation a cat's instinct is to run and hide. They usually don't go far, but it is amazing how completely they can disappear. It is highly unlikely that you will find a cat that doesn't want to be found. But given time it will relax (and get hungry). If it can hear your whistle there is a really good chance it will eventually come to you. Be persistent. Sometimes a cat will hang out in a hiding spot for as long as a week or ten days before it relaxes enough, or hunger forces it, to leave. So if you are unfortunate enough to lose a cat, each day at mealtime go to the place where you last saw it and whistle. Do this for at least ten days. The cat is probably close enough to hear you and sooner or later will probably work up the courage to come to you.

There is also a fabulous product for tracking down a lost cat, that I have on several of my cats and highly recommend. Of course it has to be on the cat before it disappears.

A good argument for training a cat to walk on a leash and taking it to lots of different places is that it will get used to being "out and about" and if it accidentally escapes it doesn't panic. If being outside is a "ho hum, been there done that" sort of experience, then a quick whistle, the cat runs over to you and all is well.

Teaching a cat to go into its carrier:

Sometimes Kitty has to leave the house. It could be a trip to the vet, or a vacation or an evacuation due to an imminent natural disaster. The only really secure way to transport a cat is to have it locked in a carrier. I urge you to take this seriously. No matter how well behaved your cat is, a sudden loud noise, you tripping over something, someone bumping in to you, and dozens of other possibilities could cause your cat to bolt. Persuading a

frightened cat to come back is not easy in the best of circumstances. If you are on crowded city streets with lots of traffic the outlook is not good!

The good news is that cats can be trained to go into a carrier without a fuss, even if they already hate it.

The trick, once again, is food. The basic idea is to gradually bring the carrier and the food closer together until the cat has to go into the carrier to eat. Then just make the carrier the place where the cat always eats. Soon the cat loves the carrier because it means: Food!

If your cat has never been in a carrier before then the process is pretty straightforward. Just put a few nuggets of food in the box and put it in the middle of a room that Kitty hangs out in. That's it. Don't try to "show" the box to the cat or try to get the cat to go in there and find the treat. Just put it down on the living room floor and go on about your daily routine. Sooner or later the cat will decide to check out the new piece of "furniture" and find the little treat. Now just build on that wonderful first impression. Put small treats in there several times a day. Before long the carrier will be the cat's favorite piece of furniture. Now make the carrier the place that the cat normally eats. Pick a word or noise that becomes the "call to the box" and use that each time you feed the cat. Before long the cat will show up and get in the carrier every time you call.

If you want to take it further, you can start gradually getting the cat used to being closed in the box and being carried around in it. The key is to move forward in very small steps with lots of praise and treats. If it's done correctly the cat associates the whole game with food and attention and actually enjoys it. If you move too fast the cat gets scared.

Important Note: Don't walk away from the carrier once the cat is locked in there. It is way too easy to become distracted and forget about the cat. Obviously this is a really, really bad thing to do!

Now, if your cat knows exactly what the carrier is and already hates it you have to accept that persuading Kitty to like the "box" is going to take a while

I would start by putting the carrier down on the floor and just leave it out, so that Kitty realizes that this time the appearance of the box does not mean a trip to the vet. I'd put a few nuggets of dry food in the carrier to reward the cat on the off chance that it gives the box a "look see". It is unlikely that the cat will go anywhere near the box at first, but if you notice that the food has disappeared then by all means replace it! Even if the cat won't go near the box when we are around, we want to do everything we can to have Kitty associate the box with good things! After the box has been out for a while, start moving it closer to where the cat eats. Don't rush this part. If the cat is anxiously looking at box instead of enjoying the meal you are moving too fast. We want the cat to begin to associate the box with the best times of the day, mealtimes! Meal by meal, day by day the box gets gradually closer and closer. Eventually, Kitty will accept the food dish being put in the very entrance of the box and from then eventually worked all the way to the back. The whole process may take a long

time, but the only real “work” for you is to take three quarters of a second to move the carrier an inch or so every once in a while.

When you do have to use the carrier to take the cat to the vet, just go back to the normal routine as if nothing happened. The cat may be a little wary of the box for a few days, but be persistent and things will be back to normal quite quickly.

Getting in the cat carrier and coming when called are the two basic “tricks” that I think it is good for all cats to know and perform reliably. How much farther you wish to take training your cat is up to you.

Many people train their cats to walk on leashes, take car rides and even travel on vacation with them. The key to all of these things is to work slowly and consistently and to make each new experience a good one for the cat. Give lots of praise and affection, a liberal smattering of treats, then lots more praise and affection and it is amazing what a cat will not only accept, but actually enjoy.

There is a technique, often called “Clicker” training, that is a very useful and interesting way to train a cat to do all sorts of remarkable tricks.

The first goal in clicker training is to establish a simple form of communication between the trainer and the cat. The cat learns to understand that a specific noise means the trainer is saying “I like what you just did and I’m going to reward you for it”. This allows the trainer to pick just about anything the cat does and “encourage” it do the same thing again and to do it on command. If the cat lifts a paw, turns to the left, yawns, gets urine in the litter box instead of over the side, does that cute little thing with its ear or whatever else, we can encourage it to do it again, and on command. We can even gently show the cat what we want it to do (a little pressure on the rump for “sit” for example) and at the same time make the noise to tell the cat “we like it and will reward you when you do that”.

Incidentally, the name “Clicker training” comes from the little metal gizmo, used by many trainers, that “clicks” when it is squeezed. The clicking noise becomes the sound that means “I like what you just did and I’m going to reward you”. I discovered that instead of the “click” I can just say a word. I save a few bucks, there is no little gizmo to lose, and I can train several cats at the same time because each one understands and responds to its own “training word”.

Whatever “training sound” you choose, it is an amazingly effective technique and once you and your cat get the hang of it, it can be very useful for encouraging “good behavior” around the house as well as just learning silly tricks for the fun of it.

If the trainer is open minded enough to notice and “listen” this training also gives the cat the ability to communicate the message “I’m hungry”. Often a cat that understands clicker training will come over to me and quite pointedly do a trick. The implication is obvious. “Whenever I do this trick you feed me. I’m doing the trick now, so shouldn’t you feed me?”

Here is how we go about showing the cat what the click means:

Step One: Every time the trainer makes a sound the cat gets a treat.

Step Two: The trainer makes the sound, but delays a while before giving the cat the treat. The cat learns that the sound means “food”, even if the food happens later.

Step Three: The trainer picks a simple body movement that the cat often makes. Every time the cat makes that movement the trainer makes the sound (and gives a treat).

Step Four: The cat figures out that each time it makes that specific movement it gets food, so it starts making the movement on purpose.

Now the cat understands that the noise means “I like what you just did and I’m going to give you a reward of food for doing it.”

I first started playing with this technique with a cat called Kona and I was absolutely stunned at how quickly he picked up new tricks. I started with a couple of pointless tricks just to make sure I had learned the technique properly. The first “serious” trick I decided on was a handshake (one finger and paw shake really) He astounded me by picking up the basic concept in one 10 minute session. If I had been quicker to believe what I was witnessing it probably would have taken him about 3 minutes! I kept making him repeat basic steps because I kept thinking “it was a fluke”. In later sessions I continued to refine the trick, doing things like having him automatically “shake” anytime I approached him and stuck out my hand and also to use a firm “grip” by gently wrapping his claws around my fingertip and holding on, but that first 10 minute session completely and forever changed my understanding of how to train animals.

Whether you want to encourage useful or whimsical behavior, “clicker training” is amazing tool for “telling” an animal exactly what you want it to do.

I also enjoy letting the cats “train” me. I know that may sound a little odd, but there is no doubt in my mind that the cats attempt to communicate their wishes to me. The clicker trained cats will clearly communicate that they want some food by making sure that I am watching and then performing their “trick”. Other cats will make sure I am watching, then climb up on furniture and pointedly touch the door handle with a paw while alternating their view between me and outside. If that is not an obvious request to open the door I don’t know what is. If I comply with their “request” it soon develops into form of communication that we both understand just as clearly as if words had been spoken.

Some tips:

Don’t rush the four basic steps of clicker training. Give yourself and the cat a chance really get a feel for how the process works. Once you start working on “tricks” make sure the goals for each session are easily achievable. My goal for Kona’s first “shake”

lesson was just to have him consistently lift his right paw off the ground. He made it clear that he learned a lot faster than I was expecting!

Lots of short training sessions seem to work better than occasional marathon sessions. You'll probably see better results from three minute sessions four times a week than from one 30 minute session a week.

Practice one thing during each training session. Trying to learn two new tricks at the same time is confusing.

The trainer has to be very clear and consistent about exactly what earns a click and what doesn't. As the cat improves it's fine to expect more before awarding a click. Keep in mind that slow and steady is best.

How do I get my cat to stop doing the stuff that drives me nuts?

Abby had the terrible habit of dousing anything up to about three feet off the ground in copious amounts of urine. I'm almost certain this led to him being at the receiving end of angry and/or violent behavior. I can only assume that this habit was the reason he was dumped on the side of the road near my house.

I feel sorry for the people he used to live with because he is one of the dearest cats I know. They have no idea what a wonderful cat they are missing out on. He curls up in my lap at every opportunity and I fall asleep almost every night to the sound and feel of him purring contentedly on my chest.

You see, I was able to convince Abby that when he was in the house he needed to pee by squatting in the litter box. It didn't take him long to understand what I was asking of him. Now we are "living happily ever after."

"Un" training bad behavior:

First let's accept that the cat is a "roommate" and like any roommate some of its habits are going to "rub you the wrong way". Unlike many human roommates most of these habits can either be stopped or at least redirected so that they are no longer unacceptable to you. However, you also need to be reasonable. You have chosen to live with an animal. It is unfair to expect the animal to behave itself like a perfect little robot. Cats need to scratch on things to maintain their claws in proper condition. They are curious, they like to climb and hang out in high places, and they love soft warm places to sleep. They have bursts of high spirits and need to be able to run and jump and generally bounce off the walls once in a while. Occasionally they vomit or spit up a hairball. Sometimes poo sticks to their hair and falls off in the middle of the living room floor — usually when you have friends over! Their hair gets everywhere and granules of cat litter stick to their feet and get tracked all over the house every time they use the catbox. All these things and more are part of the "deal" when you decide to live with cats. It is not fair to invite a cat into your home but spend all day being upset with the animal for behaving like a cat!

I also strongly believe that most of the unusual, out of control behavior that we witness in cats is a result of them being locked up and being bored out of their cotton picking minds. I mean let's face it, when we want to punish people we lock them up in little rooms and don't let them do any of the things that would normally interest them.

Cats are smart, curious, energetic, playful little creatures that until quite recent times have always been allowed outside. I understand that in big cities, especially in high rise apartment buildings it is impossible to let a cat roam. I also understand that in many situations there are serious dangers, both to the cat and local wildlife, when a cat is let outside. I also understand that cats live longer when they are kept inside. Nonetheless, being confined to the inside of a house or apartment with exactly the same routine day in and day out is extremely boring for a cat.

I am fortunate to live in a situation that is just about ideal for cats. I live in close proximity to 35 of them and look after a total of about 50. When I am here to supervise, I let them out to roam on the farm we live on. When they start to get sleepy I call them into the backyard which is fenced so that they can't get out and predators can't get in. They are free to roam in and out of the house as they choose. Not one of them shreds furniture, climbs the curtains, or runs around insanely at night and keeps us awake (5-7 of them sleep on the bed). Nor do any of them paw incessantly at doors or meow non-stop. They all use the cat boxes properly. However, there have been a couple of occasions when I have had to keep them cooped up for a while. They definitely start to get restless after a few days and bad behavior starts to surface. If I had to keep them all inside all the time I think it would be absolute mayhem!

Keep all that in mind before you get too upset with Kitty. Leash training your cat and getting it used to the car so you can take it with you when you go places might provide enough interesting new experiences to calm down some of the other bad habits. Turning Kitty into a little circus performer with tons of "clicker" training might also help to channel some of that extra curiosity and energy and provide the cat with something interesting and challenging to do.

One of the best ways to solve bad behavior problems is to give the cat an acceptable alternative.

For example: If kitty just loves to climb the curtains, then go and buy a length of thick sisal rope, or a length of cheap fabric and make a "curtain" that it's ok to climb. Make it into one of Kitty's clicker trained "tricks", and make it a daily routine to do the trick over and over again until Kitty is tired of climbing curtains.

If Kitty just shreds furniture, make the furniture as uninviting as possible (double sided tape, noisy cans to knock over, maybe even a motion activated "sprinter") and at the same time create lots of acceptable alternative scratching sites. Once again making scratching a "clicker" trick and encourage the acceptable behavior.

If your cat sleeps all day it is going to have lots of energy at night. Frankly in my house I disturb the cats at night more than they disturb me. All 35 of them are out cold from lights out until I get up in the morning. Keeping Kitty awake during the day, especially if you are not there is a challenge. If you can train the cat to come to work with you that would be fabulous. Otherwise a healthy dose of training, some playing and maybe even a leash walk in the evening are all ways to discharge the batteries so that Kitty isn't so full of beans at two in the morning.

As long as this article is, I feel I am just scratching the surface. I could say more and give lots more examples, but hopefully there is enough here for you to build on.

I feel also that I must give tons of credit to Warren and Fay Eckstein who co-wrote *How to Get Your Cat To Do What You Want*. It is by far the best book I have read on cat behavior and I thoroughly recommend that you buy a copy and read it cover to cover. Much of what you have read here has its roots in their advice.