

## Your Cat Is Far More Trainable Than You Think – Here's Proof

Does your cat annoy you or control you to the point of no return? If she's trained you to do her bidding instead of vice versa, take heart. This training tool, plus your cat's primary motivation, can help you train these 3 key behaviors and give you a new cat in a matter of weeks.

**Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker**

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- If your cat has you trained instead of the other way around, take heart
- Many cats are quite trainable because they understand cause and effect
- Reward-based training using treats, petting and play is the best way to shape your cat's behavior
- The first three things to teach your kitty: go to space, touch a target and sit
- Kitty kindergarten classes can be very beneficial for kittens between 8 and 15 weeks of age

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Have you ever been distracted or annoyed by a kitty who performs certain behaviors that seem designed to drive you nuts? For example, many cats meow over and over (and over) when it's mealtime. The only way to get them to zip it is to feed them. The result? Kitty learns persistent meowing delivers results.

Some cats jump on the bed first thing in the morning and perform a range of rude behaviors to wake their human so they can have breakfast. These behaviors include hunting toes under the covers, jumping back and forth over their human, head butting and others. Most people respond by getting up and feeding kitty. The result? Kitty learns her crack-of-dawn antics deliver results.

And then there are the cats who enjoy plopping down on their human's computer keyboard, or the newspaper or magazine they're trying to read. These kitties are rewarded with a little scratching and stroking before they're shooed away. The result? They learn being a buttinsky delivers results.

It's obvious cats can and do learn behaviors to achieve certain goals. If you have an interest in training your feline family member instead of the reverse, you'll be happy to know that since cats clearly understand cause and effect (e.g., "My incessant meowing will cause my human to feed me"), many are actually quite trainable.

### Picking the Right Tool to Mark Desired Behaviors in Your Cat

Like dogs, cats respond best to reward-based training using treats, petting and play. And as is the case with dogs, you can also use clicker training to mold your kitty's behavior. The concept is simple: the clicker is used to mark a desired behavior at the precise second the behavior is performed, followed immediately by a treat.

It's important to use the clicker ONLY to mark desired behavior. Random, playful or absent-minded clicking will decrease the influence the clicker has in shaping your cat's behavior. It's also important to be aware that the clicking sound unnerves some kitties, typically timid, **shy types**. If this is the case with your cat, try a quieter clicker, click behind your back or use a ballpoint pen instead. Another option is to use a verbal cue in place of the click.

A one-syllable word cue is best, but make sure it isn't a word you or other family members use all the time. The goal is to teach your cat to associate the click or the word only with desired behaviors.

## Picking the Most Motivating Reward for Your Cat

If your cat is food-motivated, use either small kitty treats or tiny portions of his regular food as the reward after each click or verbal cue. Make sure the portions are truly tiny to keep him motivated, and if possible hold training sessions right before mealtime when he's hungry. If your kitty loves toys and games, you can also use these as rewards during training sessions. Make sure you use his favorite toys or new ones you're confident he'll be jazzed about.

Interactive toys, including wands, tend to be the most useful for training purposes because you can deliver the reward immediately. Finally, some cats are very responsive to petting. If your kitty loves to be handled by you, try using petting and praise as his reward for performing a desired behavior.

## Teach These 3 Behaviors First

According to pet behavior expert and trainer Mikkel Becker (no relation!), there are three behaviors you should train your cat to do first: Go to space, touch a target and sit.<sup>1</sup>

- **Go to space** — The goal here is to teach kitty to head for her bed or some other cat-comfy area when you ask her to. You want her to make a positive connection with the specific area so she'll be more inclined to hang out there (versus on your kitchen counter, dining room table, laptop keyboard, etc.)

If you make a carrier your cat's go-to space, transporting her when necessary will be less stressful for her because she already associates comfort and positivity with the carrier.

- **Touch a target** — According to Becker, "This behavior encourages the cat to approach new people and directs the cat to perform other desired behaviors, such as move with their person out of an off-limits room and into a cat-friendly space. You can also use the target to direct the kitty to go into a certain area when needed, such as into their crate. In the veterinary hospital, you can use targeting to move the feline when needed or to encourage a positive association with the veterinary team."
- **Sit** — Teaching kitty to sit to ask for things, such as food or attention, can help replace rude behaviors like the relentless meowing I mentioned earlier, or the always-popular butt-in-your-face maneuver.

## For Kitten Parents

If your fuzzy family member is a kitten, I highly recommend enrolling him or her in kitten kindergarten. These classes are designed specifically for kittens 8 to 15 weeks of age who have received their first set of **kitten shots**. This is the period during which they are most receptive and open to learning new things and bonding with other kitties and humans.

During the meet-ups, young cats have the opportunity to interact and play with people and other kittens. The classes are typically equipped with a variety of cat toys and scratching posts (and litterboxes), and involve games to help kitties develop proper social and play behavior.

The goal of kitten kindergarten is to teach positive behaviors, which will help prevent the development of troublesome behaviors in the future. For example, it's especially important for kittens who were taken from their mother and littermates too soon to engage in activities that teach bite inhibition.

Another benefit of the classes is that they typically take place over several weeks, which helps kittens get accustomed to going in and out of their carriers (more about that below), and riding in the car. And if the classes happen to be held at a veterinary clinic, kittens get accustomed to that environment as well.

When you enroll your kitten in a kindergarten class, you'll be told what supplies to bring. Common items include a **cat harness and leash**, and a brush. Part of your kitten's training will involve learning to accept being brushed and having sensitive areas of her body handled (e.g., paws, tail, ears and inside her mouth).

## 5 Steps to Familiarize Your Kitten With a Carrier

1. Bring home the carrier before you pick up your kitten, and set it up in a quiet, low-traffic area of your home. Place some comfy bedding in there, and prop or tie the door open so it can't accidentally close. Kitty may get curious enough to begin going in and out on her own.
2. The next step is to entice her with food, so place her food bowl close to the carrier. Add a small amount of a special treat she loves on top of her meal to further tempt her. Once kitty is eating from the bowl without hesitation, start moving it closer each meal, until she's eating comfortably very close to the carrier. Next, place the food bowl inside the carrier, right at the entrance, so she can reach bites of food without having to actually step inside.
3. After several days of eating out of her food bowl placed just inside the carrier entrance, it's time to move the dish further in. Move it a few inches toward the back of the carrier each day, until she's standing completely inside as she eats.
4. Put a few of your kitty's favorite toys and treats into the carrier at random times. The idea is to associate only pleasant, fun and yummy things with the carrier each time she investigates it. Consider placing some **organic catnip** in there as well. I've also found that spraying a feline facial pheromone like Feliway in the carrier several times a week can also be very beneficial, or using stress reducing flower essences for anxiety or fear.
5. Once kitty is feeling at home in her carrier, try closing the door for a very short time with her inside, making sure to let her out before she becomes anxious or panics. Slowly extend the time in the crate by 30 seconds to a minute during each practice session. When you can close the door for significant periods of time without upsetting her, you can start bringing her along on short car rides to get her accustomed to being in her carrier in a moving car.

Each time you return home with kitty, go right back to providing meals, toys and treats in the crate so she continues to associate her carrier with goodness. Ideally, your cat will come to view her carrier as a comfy, safe space.

## Sources and References

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