

Positive Reinforcement: Training Your Cat with Treats and Praise

Positive reinforcement is the presentation of something pleasant or rewarding immediately following a behavior. It makes that behavior more likely to occur in the future, and it is a powerful tool for shaping or changing your cat's behavior.

Correct timing is essential when using positive reinforcement. The reward must occur immediately, or your cat may not associate it with the proper action. For example, if you have your cat "sit" but reward him after he's already stood up again, he'll think he's being rewarded for standing up.

Consistency is also essential. Everyone in the family should use the same cues. It might be helpful to post these where everyone can become familiar with them. The most commonly used cues for cats are "sit," "down" (means lie down), "off" (means off of me or off the furniture), "come" and "leave it." Consistency means always rewarding the desired behavior and never rewarding undesired behavior.

For your cat, positive reinforcement may include food treats, praise or petting. Food treats work especially well for training your cat. A treat should be enticing and irresistible to your cat. It should be a very small, soft piece of food, so that he will immediately gulp it down and look to you for more. If you give him something he has to chew or that breaks into bits and falls on the floor, he'll be looking around the floor, not at you. Small pieces of soft commercial treats, canned tuna, baby food (chicken or beef), or cooked chicken or beef work well. Experiment a bit to see what works best for your cat. Each time you use a food reward, you should couple it with a verbal reward (praise). Say something like "good boy" in a positive, happy tone of voice.

Note: Some cats may not be interested in food treats. For those cats, the reward could be in the form of affection or a toy.

When your pet is learning a new behavior, he should be rewarded every time he does the behavior (continuous reinforcement). It may be necessary to use "shaping" with your pet (reinforcing something close to the desired response and gradually requiring more from your cat before he gets the treat). For example, if you're teaching your cat to "shake hands," you may initially reward him for lifting his paw off the ground, then for lifting it higher, then for touching your hand, then for letting you hold his paw and, finally, for actually shaking with you.

Intermittent reinforcement can be used once your cat has reliably learned the behavior. At first, you may reward him with the treat three times out of four, then about half the time, then about a third of the time and so on, until you're only rewarding him occasionally with the treat. Continue to praise him every time, although once he's learned the behavior, the praise can be less effusive - a quiet, but positive "good boy." Use a variable schedule of reinforcement, so he doesn't catch on that he only has to respond every other time. Your cat

will learn that if he keeps responding, eventually he'll get what he wants. If you have a cat that meows until you reward him by paying attention to him, you've seen the power of intermittent reinforcement.