



BEHAVIOR
SERIES

Positive Reinforcement

Training Your Cat

WE ALL LIKE TO BE PRAISED rather than punished. The same is true for your cat, and that's the theory behind positive reinforcement. Positive reinforcement means giving your pet something pleasant or rewarding immediately after she does something you want her to do. Because your praise or reward makes her more likely to repeat that behavior in the future, it is one of your most powerful tools for shaping or changing your cat's behavior. It's more effective to teach your pet what she should do than try to teach her what she shouldn't.

Correct timing is essential when using positive reinforcement. The reward must occur immediately—within seconds—or your cat may not associate it with the proper action. For example, when your cat uses her scratching post, you can throw a piece of dry cat food for her to chase as a reward. Many cats enjoy chasing (hunting) their food and it's good exercise too. But if you throw the food when she has stopped scratching the post and is walking toward you, she will think she's being rewarded for coming to you.

Consistency is also an important element in training. Everyone in the family should reward the same desired behaviors.

Using Positive Reinforcement

Positive reinforcement may include food treats, praise, petting, or a favorite toy or game. When your pet is first learning a new behavior, such as clawing the scratching post instead of your couch, she should be rewarded every time you catch her using her scratching post. You may even help shape her behavior of using the scratching post by spraying it with catnip (if she reacts positively to catnip) or enticing her with a toy that you dangle on the post. Taking your cat over to the scratching post,

positioning her paws on the post, and raking them along the post to show her what she's supposed to do will likely have the opposite effect of encouraging her to use the post. She may interpret your actions as frightening and uncomfortable. It's important to look at the world from her point of view.

Once your cat reliably offers the desired behavior, you may reward her with treats intermittently, for example, three out of every four times she does the behavior. Then, over time, reward her about half the time, then about a third of the time, and so on, until you're only rewarding her occasionally with a treat. Continue to praise her every time. Your cat will learn that if she keeps offering desired behaviors, eventually she'll get what she wants—your praise and an occasional treat. You won't be forever bound to carry a pocketful of goodies, but it's fun to surprise your cat from time to time.

The Pros and Cons of Punishment

Punishment can be verbal, postural, or physical and is meant to make your pet immediately associate something unpleasant when she does something you don't want her

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