



Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA

Training Your Cat

That's right. You *can* train a cat and *should* consider the idea for a number of reasons. A cat who has been trained to come when called is much easier to catch when she escapes and to find when she is lost. Cats don't normally live long on city streets. Most people shout and give chase, causing the cat to panic and run. If the cat has been trained, tragedy may be averted.

The greater the number of words from the human language the cat understands, the easier it is for you to communicate your wishes. For example, a cat who has been trained to "go to litterbox" or "climb scratching post" will be less likely to soil the house or scratch furniture. A cat who enjoys vigorous training exercises with her human at 10:00 pm will be less likely to be stir crazy at 2:00 am.

Training enriches the relationship between you and your cat. It is a means to make life easier for both you and your cat.

Come Here

First decide on a suitable signal. Verbal commands, whistling and hand clapping are ideal because you can give the signal at any time. Don't rely on signaling devices, such as a bell or a "silent" (ultrasonic) dog whistle, as these may not be on hand in an emergency.

Start the training when the cat is hungry. Get a few of her favorite treats and give one to her for free, to let her know that some game is afoot. Hold out a second treat, back up a yard, and say, "Kitty, come here." Give the cat a treat when she comes. If she does

not come, try again an hour later, when the cat is a little hungrier. Most likely, the cat will come running. Keep repeating the exercise, backing up farther and farther. Once the cat has the idea, there is no need to reward her each time. In fact, she will respond more enthusiastically if she is only rewarded once every five or six tries. There is a rule of thumb here: if the cat always comes, reward her less often (think of Kitty's waistline). If the cat loses interest, reward more often. Reinforce the cat's speedier or more athletic responses.

Once the cat readily comes when called, it is time to make the exercise more fun. Two people can go to either end of the house and call the cat back and forth. This is a convenient and enjoyable way to allow the cat to let off steam in the evening, which in turn will reduce the likelihood that she will go stir crazy in the middle of the night.

Place Commands

Training the cat to go to specific places in the house can be useful for the prevention and treatment of a variety of behavior problems. For example, training the cat to "Go to litter box" is useful in housetraining. A cat who has been trained to climb her scratching post on command will be less likely to scratch furniture.

These commands can be taught in a number of ways. You can give the command and then lure the cat to the appropriate location, where she will find another tasty treat. Alternatively, two people may train the cat. One person gives the command, and the other calls and encourages the cat to approach the desired



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location. The second person rewards the cat with a food treat when she arrives. Once she learns to go to the location without encouragement, give her several treats.

Many of the useful place commands eventually become activity commands. For example, during initial training, “Climb your scratching post” simply means go to the base of the post, where the cat will find a treat. As training progresses, place the treat so that the cat has to reach up and put her front paws on the post to claim her reward. Place rewards higher and higher with each trial, so that Kitty has to climb the post. Post-climbing is another great way for the cat to burn off energy in the evening. In addition, it is a useful command when the cat wakes up from a nap to get her to the appropriate location to reach up, stretch, and condition her claws. In the morning, delay the reward until the cat starts to scratch her post.

When training Kitty to go to her litterbox, at first, give her a treat just for going over to her box. Don't leave food near the litterbox, since this may inhibit the cat from eliminating (cats seldom eliminate close to a food source). Either lead the cat to her box and feed her by hand, or use affection as a reward and stroke and scratch the cat when she arrives. Later in training, the cat will be required to climb inside the box before she is petted. Once the cat has the general idea, reserve the command for times when it is likely the cat will eliminate. For example, tell her to go to her litterbox several minutes after a

meal, or immediately after waking. Praise the cat as she approaches the box and steps inside. If the cat eliminates, she wins the jackpot.

Position Commands

Once you start a training program, you will find it a lot of fun, and will be impressed with your cat's enthusiasm. Why not go on to bigger and better things? Many cats can be trained to do all the characteristically doggy commands: sit, lie down, roll over, shake hands, heel, and jump through hoops. In fact, some cats put dogs to shame in this department.

To train the cat to heel, just hold a food treat, bend over like Groucho Marx, say “Kitty, heel” and start walking. To get the cat to sit, hold a food treat at nose level and lift it upwards and backwards over the cat's head. As her head goes back, her rear end will sit down. Reward the cat as soon as she sits. If the cat backs up, do the exercises in a corner. If the cat rears up, you are holding the food treat too high. (This is how to train your cat to stand on her hind legs.) To get her to lie down, start with the cat in a sitting position, lower the treat to the ground between her forepaws and hold it palm down.

By now you should have a good idea how to use a food treat to lure the cat to specific areas of the house and to entice her to assume a variety of body positions. You can also use toys such as a catnip mouse or ball to entice and lure the cat into the position you want.

For more info, call our free Behavior Helpline (650/340-7022 x783 or, for Spanish, x786) or consider a low-cost consultation. To make a consultation appointment, call 650/340-7022 x667. The PHS/SPCA Behavior Department, like many shelter programs, is funded by donations.