

Training Your Cat

The principles of training are the same for cats and dogs, however, you'll find some variation in the pace of sessions, the best types of reinforcers, and the most strategic methods for treat delivery when training your cat.

The pace of a training session

In general, cats' movements are slow paced and deliberate, especially during their first training sessions. Additionally, cats take a longer time than dogs to eat their treats. If you have experience training energetic, bouncy dogs, you can expect to get significantly fewer repetitions with a cat in a one or two-minute training session.

Expect your cat to need shorter training sessions than dogs. Don't be surprised if a novice cat chooses to end her session after just five reps. As your cat becomes more experienced with training sessions, she will likely increase her pace and be able to work for longer periods of time.

Food reinforcers

CHOOSING TREATS

Time your first training session to occur when your cat is likely to be hungry. For example, try a session before his evening meal. He will be extra motivated to work at this time. If you free feed your cat by providing access to a full food bowl all day long, you may wish to switch your feeding routine. Cats are grazers and often prefer multiple, small meals each day. Utilizing a special meal of canned food or treats during a training session can be impactful.

If you are worried about your cat's potential to gain weight, reduce the amount of kibble in each of his meals to compensate for the extra calories he will receive during training sessions. Ensure that the training treats are primarily composed of high-quality protein like canned cat food. Occasionally a cat loves his kibble so much that he will work for his kibble, but this is more the exception than the rule.

When you start to work with your cat, find several food items your cat finds very delicious. Additionally, find at least one treat your cat loves that you can easily toss onto the floor. Prior to your first training session, offer a selection of treats to determine your cat's preference. Excellent choices to try include:

- High quality canned cat food
- Meat-based baby food (no onions)
- Soft, commercial treats

TREAT DELIVERY

The momentum of a training session can be lost if a cat takes too long to eat a treat or becomes satiated quickly on a few large-sized pieces. Break commercial treats into very small pieces—the size of one quarter of a pea. Your cat will eat soft treats much more quickly than crunchy ones, so always choose soft treats for training.

For rapid treat delivery, use a Popsicle stick or small spoon to deliver wet food like chicken-flavored baby food or canned cat food. Allow the cat a couple of licks of the treat and then remove the stick or spoon until after the next click. A small syringe filled with baby food is also a great delivery system for rapid, mess-free treating. Simply present the syringe near your cat's mouth and squeeze out a little of the baby food. He'll quickly learn to lick the end of the syringe.

TREAT PLACEMENT

A useful training strategy includes providing the treat at a place or in a position that resets your cat for the next repetition of the behavior. You might accomplish this by tossing a treat or delivering food on a spoon in a specific location away from your cat's current position. Tossing treats will be useful when you teach your cat to move to a mat or into a carrier.

You're all set to begin your first training session!