Basic Cat Training Guidelines

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Are cats incapable of understanding our disciplinary or training commands, or are they just ignoring us? There is a lot of evidence that cats can learn, although they do it differently than dogs do. And experts disagree almost violently on whether cats really learn or not. One expert says, "you cannot, of course, teach a cat in the sense of training it." while another says, "of course cats are trainable."

Cats can learn, but not like dogs. People who are used to a dog's quick obedience response are sorely disappointed to find out that cats do not respond to the same training methods. In order for a cat to learn something, she must want to do it. If a cat is not inclined to want to do something, the trainer must make her think that she wants to do it.

Why they do the things they do

First of all, do not think that a cat's inappropriate behavior must be tolerated. While cats and dogs are different, there is no reason why a cat can't be taught to live in harmony with us.

Next, remember that many cat behaviors that we do not like are natural behaviors for the cat. If we don't guide them to the correct behaviors, they'll never want to do them or learn them.

Get a good cat behavior book to understand why your cat does the things she does and you will be more successful in molding her behavior.

Positive reinforcement vs. aversive conditioning

Positive reinforcement includes giving treats or talking in a soft, happy voice as a reward for behaviors like using a scratching post or walking on a leash. Aversive conditioning provides an undesirable stimulus to stop a behavior. As an example, a startle correction using a loud noise can distract a cat who is scratching on the furniture. A scat mat can provide a static shock to discourage a cat from jumping up on a counter.

A combination of the two types of behavior modifications can be used when you want to redirect undesirable natural behavior (like chewing on plants or scratching furniture) to wanted behavior. Use a startle correction when the cat is scratching on the furniture, and positive reinforcement when she uses the scratching post.

Training to scratch the right things

One of the most offensive behaviors that cat owners report is scratching inappropriate objects. Try the following training program:

- When you first witness her using the back of a couch or chair, make a loud noise (such as tossing an empty soda can filled with several pennies) to distract her. She should not know the noise is coming from you, otherwise she may learn she can always get your attention by scratching on the furniture.
- Bring her over to the scratching post, preferably scented with catnip.
- Show her what you want her to do by making scratching movements with your hands - she may give you a strange look, but it will work eventually.
- When she responds, immediately offer a healthy treat.
- At first, put the scratching posts near the furniture they tend to scratch the most. You can eventually move the scratching posts to the area that you prefer.
- Any time she uses the scratching post on her own initiative, also give her a treat.

You can use these types of training tips to teach your cat just about anything, from sitting to walking on a leash to using a cat door. The important thing is to make your cat want to learn the behavior - to give her a reason to do the things you want her to do.

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