

Why Train a Cat?

From *Getting Started: Clicker Training for Cats*

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Why would you want to try to train a cat? Everyone knows it can't be done. "Training cats" is an oxymoron. 'Herding cats' is a metaphor for trying to do the impossible. What would you train your cat to do—look beautiful? They know that. Stay clean in the house? Most cats are very careful about that. Would you want your cat to do dog-type tricks and wear funny hats? Certainly not. We respect cats for their dignity. How about being intelligent, affectionate, and amusing? They already are. Cats don't need training: that's one reason we enjoy their company. They come complete with everything they need to know. In fact, your cat probably trains you.

Clicking, however, is not really training as we usually think of it. It doesn't consist of commanding and obeying. It doesn't depend on social relationships such as dominance, or a desire to please. It's more like trading. Imagine that you're trying to strike a bargain with someone whose language you don't speak. You might use gestures and sounds to communicate "I'd like to buy that bracelet. I'll give you this much money." Clicking is like making a bargain. Since cats don't always recognize our gestures and noises, we use a clicker. The arbitrary click identifies what you like and promises to pay for it with something the cat likes.

That's all there is to it. The cat happens to jump off the table; you click, *during* the jump, and then give the cat a treat. Do it again a few times, and you'll have a cat that jumps off the table when it sees you coming. Don't want that? Okay, click as the cat happens to jump *on* the table; then give it a treat. After a few trades you can have a cat that jumps *onto* the table when it sees you coming.

When the cat seems confident about the plan, you can add a word or a gesture to indicate that the trading post is open and you're paying for jumps. Up! And the cat jumps up. Down! And the cat jumps down. *Click*. Amaze your friends.

The click can give you power to control your cat's behavior, and maybe sometimes you want that. But this is more than just a humane new way to keep a cat off the dining room table. (Or on the table, if you prefer.) It's really a way of communicating with another species. It's quick and easy for you. It's fun for the cat. The clicker game—for that's what it is, a powerful sort of game—can improve your cat's health, activity level,

and attitude toward life. It can make your cat happier and more affectionate. By changing the cat's attitude it can also change the attitude of friends and family toward the cat. Above all—and this is what makes method worth trying—clicker transactions can help you and your cat develop a level of mutual communication, understanding, and esteem that you may never have imagined possible.

Improving a cat's daily life and attitude

Clicker training gives a cat—especially a housebound or apartment cat—something to do besides eat and sleep. Even the least little bit of time spent in clicker interactions, perhaps three or four minutes a day, will make changes in your cat. Aggressive, overactive animals calm down; couch potatoes rev up. In an elderly cat, clicker games can stimulate youthful playfulness and exploration once again. You know your cat can be amusing and personable; now you'll see that side of your pet more often, and so will your housemates, relatives, and friends.

The clicker game may also make your cat more interested in you. Did you ever have the feeling that you bore your cat? Does she ignore you until she hears the can opener? Does he sometimes run when you bend over to pick him up, struggle when you hold him, or duck when you offer a pat? Clicker games can change all that, not just because you hand out treats, but because you become an interesting challenge. The cat's part in the game is not to learn tricks, but to find ways to make you click so you'll give it a pat or a treat. From your standpoint you may be teaching the cat to come when called, or to roll over. From the cat's standpoint, it's training you to click; and that's very satisfying to cats.

In a way, the clicker game replaces the unavailable excitements of exploring and hunting in the wild. It gives the cat something interesting to do, not just with its agile body but with its far from insignificant intelligence. A 'clicker-wise' cat—one that has learned how to communicate through the game—may even initiate new clicker games with you, using its own creativity. (These are usually a lot more acceptable than finding new ways of making trouble, which the cat may enjoy and you may not.)

If your cat does have a behavior problem, clicker training can help. But clicker training is not aimed at controlling behavior you don't like—it's designed to build new behavior. With this construction tool you can supplant old, unwanted behavior with new, desirable behavior; more than that, you can use your imagination—and your cat's—to find new things to do together, new ways to have fun. Clicker training is a way to enhance life for the cat and for you too.

Karen Pryor, *Getting Started: Clicker Training for Cats* (Boston: Sunshine Books, Inc., 2001), 1.