



You and the Feline Mind

By Kerry Jackson, DVM, MS

It is a common misconception among cat owners (and non cat owners!) that cats are a low maintenance pet. Sure, we know that a dog needs to be walked, played with, and can learn many tricks, but few people know that the same is true of our cats! Most cats spend incredibly boring lives, eating out of a bowl and sleeping most of the day with little else to do—all their physical needs immediately met by well meaning and otherwise caring owners, but with no mental challenges or entertainment to bring their full potential to life. So, what can be done to expand the potential of every cat?

Our domestic cats come from a long line of small hunters. They spend their days and nights prowling a territory of an acre or more, finding, pursuing and catching small rodents, insects, lizards and birds. They ritually marked various parts of their territory with urine, feces or scratching to communicate with neighboring cats. When food was plentiful, cats formed social groups with other cats, just as feral cats do when food is provided regularly. They were required to walk, jump, run, stalk, pounce, groom, watch, listen, interact, and provide for themselves every day. Our house cats still have all of those instincts and are designed for that active and challenging life.

Relationships between cats and humans are very diverse. Approximately 15% of cats are resistant to social interaction with humans. Depending on genetics and early socialization between 2 and 7 weeks of age, cats can desire contact with many people or other pets, or be selective in their interactions. Since we usually obtain a kitten or cat after the end of the most critical socialization period, Careful attention to regular handling, training and consistency in enforcing our expectations will create and maintain our best possible feline relationship.

What should an ideal pet cat act like? You have to decide this first, before attempting to shape a behavior. Start with the basics. We recommend the following as a goal for every pet cat:

- Cat can be handled by every person to check face, ears, feet, collar, skin and coat, belly and under tail.
- Grooming such as brushing, bathing, ear care, teeth care, nail trims should be well tolerated if performed by any person.
- You can give a pill, liquid or topical medication or treatment with no difficulty.
- Cat should willingly go into and out of a carrier.
- Cat can tolerate leash restraint or walk on a leash.
- Car rides (while restrained in a carrier or leashed) should be tolerated. New places or people should not elicit undue stress.
- Cat should not jump onto kitchen counters or prohibited furniture or other household locations.
- The cat should not bite or play aggressively.
- Cats should get along with other pets such as dogs, ferrets, birds or rabbits. Small pets that resemble natural prey are best kept secure from the cat for their own safety.

Whew! That seems like an impossible goal. Do you see problem areas where your cat can

improve? Remember, the key to modifying behavior is gentle and consistent reinforcement of desired behaviors with appropriate rewards. Some cats may love food treats, such as regular dry kibble, cat treats, or special foods such as small pieces of chicken, sardines, or beef. Use lemon juice to get the smell off your fingers after every training session! Other cats may enjoy chasing a ball or playing with a certain toy. Undesirable behaviors may require several strategies to extinguish the misbehavior. Let's start with some helpful references.

Books to Read:

1. Felinestein, Pampering the Genius in Your Cat. Suzanne Delzio and Cindy Ribarich, D.V.M, Harper Perennial 1999, N.Y.
2. The Cat Behavior Answer Book. 2nd Ed. Arden Moore, Storey Pub., 2022
3. The Clever Cat Trick Kit. Steve Duno, Metrobooks, N.Y. 2007
4. 51 Ways to Entertain Your House Cat While You're Out. Stephanie Laland, Barnes and Noble Harper Pub. 1994, N.Y.
5. Kittens for Dummies. Dusty Rainbolt, Wiley Pub. 2019
6. Cat Training in 10 Minutes and Advanced Cat Training in 10 minutes. Miriam Fields-Babineau
7. The Cat Behavior Answer Book, 2nd Ed. Arden Moore 2022
8. Getting Started: Clicker Training for Cats. Karen Pryor

Web Help:

General Supply Web Sites: cat trees, outdoor enclosures, etc.

www.drsfostersmith.com/cat-supplies/: toys, cat trees, many more items.

www.jefferspet.com/cat/: cat trees, toys.

All pet store sites (Petco, Petsmart, That Pet Palace, Cat Guys, etc.)

Hide Food and Treats:

www.kongcompany.com

www.petsafe.net: the Egg-cersizer food dispensing toy and Twist n' treat, Come with Me Kitty harness and bungee leash

Training aids to discourage inappropriate scratching, jumping on counters.

www.snappytrainer.com: a simple, startle device based upon a mousetrap

www.softpaws.com: Nail covers to prevent scratching damage

www.pioneerpet.com: Sticky Paws: strips of a sticky tape to discourage scratching.

www.amazon.com Books, training tools and supplies.

Basic Principles:

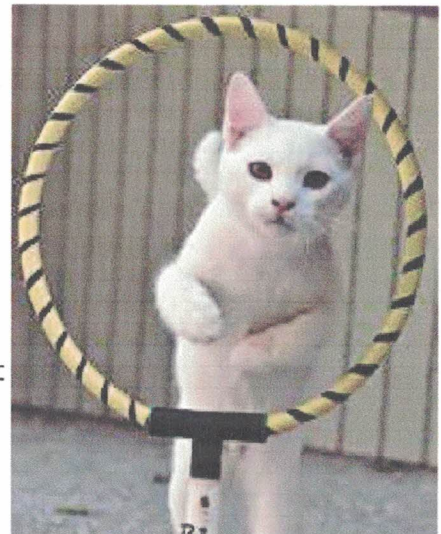
When attempting to modify your cat's behavior, there are a few basic principles that are similar to, but not identical to, dog training. First, you cannot force a cat to do any particular behavior or task (i.e. force to sit down). Cats are rarely motivated by praise alone, a food reward is usually needed in the initial training phase. Try regular kibble, or a more enticing treat such as canned food, commercial cat treats, **small** pieces of dried liver, hot dogs, or sardines. It is **very important** to reduce the amount fed in your cat's regular meals to avoid overfeeding. Remember, indoor cats need only 200 calories a day—that is approximately ½

cup of most dry kibble diets. Also, this means training sessions are best done when your cat is hungry, like just prior to feeding.

Second, training sessions are best done in short sessions, since a cat's attention span is usually not more than 10 minutes for any one task. Ideally, 5 minutes a day, in a quiet area with minimal distractions is best to start any behavior modification. This includes handling and grooming procedures. Be consistent with verbal or hand signal commands, and only reward the behavior and give the command when the cat completes the desired task. Avoid the use of "NO" for simply not following directions. Reserve this for behaviors (such as scratching on the sofa) that you wish to discourage. Make sure all family members are compliant to avoid confusing the cat.

Variety is also important. This is especially true with toys and games for daily mental stimulation. You will be surprised at how quickly your cat will learn a given behavior, and it is important to keep training sessions fun, and not bore the cat. Pick different training sites every 2-3 days. This will help reinforce the behavior under many different situations. Pick 2 or 3 behaviors to learn, and rotate until the cat has mastered them in all the different locations. For play and mental stimulation, rotate cat toys regularly (clean and put away a set of toys for 2 weeks minimum) and vary the location and type of play. For example, roll a ball toy one day, hide it the next.

In order to discourage misbehavior, the use of "booby traps" such as empty soda cans stacked on a counter which fall loudly when the cat jumps up, snappy trainers, tossing an empty can filled with coins or washers to make a loud noise, sticky tape or aluminum foil over furniture or walls to avoid scratching are the method of choice. You must be an innocent bystander, not the bad guy, to avoid the cat associating the negative event with you, and also, you want the cat to think these bad things will happen every time the cat misbehaves regardless of who is or isn't home! Always provide a more desirable alternative, a sturdy scratching post with cat treats placed on top for scratching, a window perch or cat tree instead of the counter. Shape the behavior in the direction you wish to go, and give the cat a choice in the desired behavior.



Remember, cats are individuals, and just like people, their talents will vary. Some cats will enjoy learning athletic tricks such as jumping through a hoop, while others are happy with sit and lay down. Older cats may take longer to train than a young kitten. So, finally: Know your cat. Be creative. Interact daily. And most of all, have fun!