

Trick Training Your Cat

Trick training has long been thought to be a dog's game, but not anymore! Cats are excellent candidates for trick training. There are *some* differences between the way cats and dogs are trained, of course. Cats aren't as likely to be motivated by praise as dogs. Cats are also less instinctively driven to work in partnership with their human companions. But that doesn't mean they're not superstars in waiting. With the right methods — and a little creativity on your part — your cat will soon amaze you with the things they can learn. Cats should only be taught new behaviours with positive, reward-based training. Punishment and dominance are not healthy methods, nor are they effective¹.



Getting started

Here are some ideas to get you started on training your feline friend.

- **Pick the right reinforcer for your cat.** Reinforcers are the rewards you offer to your cat during training sessions. Food is the strongest reinforcer for most cats.
- **Keep sessions short.** Approximately 3 minutes is a good length of time for most cats. More importantly, always end the session before your cat loses interest so that they don't become frustrated or bored. This will make them more motivated to work the next time.
- **Limit distractions.** This allows kitty to focus on the task at hand.
- **Start with your cat's natural instincts and inclinations.** Is your cat always knocking things off the shelf with its paws? Teach them high five. Does your cat have a favourite toy to chase after? Teach them to fetch.
- **Start small.** Don't expect your cat to be jumping through hoops overnight.
- **Stay positive and have fun.** Don't be discouraged if your cat doesn't catch on right away. You are essentially teaching them a new language and it may take them some time to pick it up. Often once a cat understands the basics, the pace at which they learn new tricks increases.



Benefits of trick training

Trick training isn't just for our entertainment (although that is a perfectly acceptable reason to train your cat). There are many practical benefits to training your cat:

- Provides mental and physical stimulation.
- Increases confidence in shy cats.
- Creates a positive outlet for excess energy.
- Strengthens your bond with your cat.
- Helps reduce unwanted behaviours (e.g., scratching the furniture) by replacing them with the desired behaviours (e.g., scratching the post).
- Cool party tricks! Who doesn't want a cat that high fives all the guests?



Clicker training basics

"Clicker training" is an animal training method based on operant conditioning. It relies on marking desirable behaviour and rewarding it. Desirable behaviour is usually marked by using a "clicker," a mechanical device that makes a short, distinct "click" sound which tells the animal exactly when they're doing the right thing. This clear form of communication, combined with positive reinforcement, is an effective, safe, and humane way to teach any animal any behaviour that it is physically and mentally capable of doing.

Any behaviour can be trained with any animal following these three simple steps:

1. Get the behaviour you are seeking
2. Mark the behaviour with a "click"
3. Reinforce the behaviour with a reward²

Tricks! Tricks! Tricks!

There are endless possibilities for tricks to teach your cat. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- **Target Training.** Target training is a great foundation skill. It provides the framework for training many other behaviours.
- **Go to place.** Teaching your cat to go to a specific place can help reduce certain unwanted behaviours such as inter-cat aggression and fear. It can also teach them useful skills such as going into a carrier. See
- **High five.** Cool party tricks aside, high five can be a way to get your cat used to having its paws touched.

Reference:

¹Jennifer Sellers, Petfinder contributor 'How to Teach a Cat Tricks' <https://www.petfinder.com/cats/cat-behavior-and-training/how-to-teach-a-cat-tricks/>

²KAREN PRYOR 'What is clicker training' <https://www.clickertraining.com/whatis>

