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## Basic Training for Your Cat

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No, this is not about Kitty Boot Camp! If you want to train your cat to sit, stay and heel, perhaps you should get a dog. If your goal is to train your cat to adroitly perch himself over your toilet to do his business, this article is not for you. This article is for all of us who would be happy if our cats would just use the litter box instead of our comforter, closet or shoes. This is for owners who would like their cat to use a scratching post instead of the stereo speakers. If you're like me, you admire your cat for being a cat and you want him to behave as nothing other than a cat, but a well-behaved one.

Before we can train or teach our cats to do something or to stop doing something, we need to look at how cats learn. They don't understand English, they can't read books or attend lectures. They learn by experience. If the experience is good, they will try to repeat it. If the experience is unpleasant, they will try to avoid it in the future. They enjoy raking the furniture with their claws, so they continue to do it. But it's quite a shock when they stick their nose in a candle flame, so they won't do that again.

The key to training is to make sure that whatever you want your cat to do is exceedingly rewarding and pleasurable. Whatever you don't want your cat to indulge in must never be rewarding or fun, in fact, it must be unpleasant.

Sometimes we unintentionally reward our cats for obnoxious behavior. A common complaint is that the cat pounces on the owner at five in the morning, meowing up a storm and generally being a pest. What do the owners do? They get up and feed the cat, play with him or let him outside. Kitty has learned that his behavior gets him exactly what he wants.

Many owners become frustrated because they can't catch the cat in the act of the crime, so instead they show the cat the evidence (usually a wet spot on the carpet or pieces of shredded drapery) and discipline the cat at that time. A common practice is grabbing the cat, pointing out the wet spot, then dragging him to the litter box and forcing him to dig in the litter. What the cat is learning is that being reached for by the owner is a bad experience and that the litter box is a torture chamber. It is usually difficult if not impossible to catch the cat in the act because most cats have already learned that being caught is bad news.

Reprimands simply do not work. If you catch kitty in the act, he will only misbehave when you are not around. If you punish the cat later, he will not associate the reprimand with the crime. In either case, the misbehavior continues. Some cats misbehave just to get attention and the attention is enough of a reward to cause kitty to continue his ways. So what do we do?

If you want to prevent problems from occurring, or reform kitty of his bad habits, the answers are the same. Here's a three-point plan:

First: Stop all reprimands and punishment, no matter what your cat is doing.

Second: Set kitty up to succeed in performing those behaviors you want her to learn so she can be rewarded.

Third: Set up kitty's environment so that those behaviors you don't want him to learn are not rewarding. Let's look at these a little more closely.

1. Stop all reprimands. Concentrate on making your relationship fun, rewarding, playful and interesting. Sometimes this change alone will solve your problem. Cats are known to become overly active and destructive when bored. Daily play sessions and relaxing massages help calm kitty down. Cats that feel neglected will often stop using their litter box. If you schedule regular sessions to give kitty your undivided attention and to play games with him, even litter box problems can disappear almost overnight.

2. The most effective way to train a cat is through rewards, so the second step is setting up the cat's environment so he can succeed. This will give you the opportunity to reward and praise him for good behavior.

Let's take a look at litter box training as an example. A cat's physical system is very regular. If you control the input, you are also in control of the output. Kitty should be on a regular feeding schedule so he will have a corresponding regular output schedule. Adjust his feeding time so you can be present when he needs to go. About 15 minutes prior to when you know he will need to go, take him to his litter box room. Because you and kitty are locked in the litter box room, he doesn't have the option of going on the carpet in the hall or on your bed. His only choice is the litter box. When he uses it, praise the daylights out of him! Give him a juicy chunk of salmon or another treat that is reserved for this wonderful performance. Until you're sure that kitty is completely litter box trained, don't give him free access to the rest of your home when you know his bladder and bowels are full.

3. The third step is setting up the cat's environment so that his misbehavior is not a rewarding experience. Let's take a look at furniture scratching as an example. While making kitty's scratching post fun, rewarding and exciting, it may also be necessary to make the furniture unattractive as a clawing item. Instead of you telling the cat to avoid the furniture, let the furniture itself tell the cat to stay away. It's up to you to find something your cat does not like. Each cat is different. However, most cats don't like to snag their claws when scratching, so you might try draping some netting or tulle over the furniture. Some cats don't like the feel of aluminium foil or two-sided sticky tape. A mild menthol or citrus scent repels some cats. Once your cat realizes that these places are not fun to scratch or sit on, and she regularly has wonderful times at her scratching post, the problem of inappropriate scratching will disappear.

Maybe you do want to train your cat to jump through a hoop, maybe you just want him to stop climbing the drapes. Whatever the case, remember that cats learn best through the use of rewards, praise and positive reinforcement. Set kitty up to succeed. Set yourself up to succeed with your cat. It works. And it's a lot more fun that way for both of you.