



Clicker Training – Cats

Clicker training uses a precise sound (a click) to tell the cat that she has done something to earn a reward. The clicker helps the cat pinpoint exactly which behavior earned her a treat so that she can easily repeat it the next time.

Remember, the behaviors that result in a good consequence for the cat will most likely be repeated – this is called positive reinforcement. Your cat quickly learns that she can get you to give her a treat by performing a certain behavior. Clicker training is fun for your cat to train you and fun for you to train your cat!

First Step: Association

Begin clicker training by first helping your cat associate the sound of the click with a treat. Click, then give your cat a treat; repeat five times. Click when she's in different positions and when you're in different positions. For now, your cat doesn't have to do anything to get the treat—these are "freebies." A good indication that your cat understands this association is to click when she's distracted (looking away from you). If she turns his head toward you when you click, she probably now associates the click with a treat.

Tip: Don't hold the clicker too close to your cat's face. Some cats find this intimidating or startling, and other cats fixate on the clicker. Try muffling the clicker by hiding it behind your back or in your pocket if needed.

Tip: If you have a sound-sensitive cat, the sound of the clicker may be too scary. Try holding the clicker in your pocket, or wrap it with a handkerchief to make the sound quieter. You can also switch out your clicker with a click-top pen or a verbal marker like "good!" If you're using a verbal marker, remember to keep the tone and volume of your voice the same each time.

Tip: Only click once! And *always* give a treat following the click, even if you clicked by accident.

Second Step: Capturing and Shaping

Choose one spontaneous behavior or something your cat does that you like. Some examples are sitting, looking at you, raising a paw, or lying on his bed. Each time you see your cat doing this behavior, click and treat. You need to be observant, and have your clicker and treats handy at all times. When you catch your cat doing something right, let her know.

Caution: Once you start clicking and treating your cat for a behavior, be prepared to see the behavior often. Don't choose a behavior that will become obnoxious when performed frequently.

Tip: If you're working on a behavior your cat doesn't perform naturally, reward (click and treat) partial steps in the right direction, gradually getting closer to the final position. Repeat until your cat performs the behavior easily. This is known as "shaping" a behavior.

Tip: Start training in a place with no distractions (other household pets, children, squirrels, neighborhood cats, etc.).

Tip: Gather together a variety of motivators. Food treats should be small, soft, and smelly. Let your cat select her favorites. Other motivators—petting, toys, games, or walks—work well at the end of a training session or for easier behaviors that your cat already knows well. Save the extra yummy treats for tougher behaviors!

Tip: If you make a mistake and click at the wrong time, don't worry about it, but do go ahead and give your cat a treat anyway. The click must always mean a treat is coming. Next time, pay attention and be ready to click at the precise moment your cat performs the behavior (like when her bottom hits the floor for a sit).

Tip: Cats learn at different rates. Don't get frustrated if your cat doesn't seem to learn as quickly as you'd expect. Make sure you're being consistent in the cues you give (verbal and nonverbal).

Third Step: Name It

Once your cat has the trick down, you can give it a verbal cue or a hand signal. Give the verbal cue (like "sit") and/or a hand motion (which will become a hand signal). Click and give the treat from your other hand. If you get no response or an incorrect response, don't click and treat. If you still get no response or an incorrect response, go back to practicing the behavior a few more times, and then try again.

Tip: If your cat doesn't immediately perform the behavior, the temptation is to repeat the cue. Don't fall for it—you don't want your cat to get into the habit of responding only after the third or fourth time you repeat the cue.

Tip: Check your posture. Work toward an upright posture rather than bending over your cat.

Tip: Don't assume that your cat will instantly associate the name with the behavior. Lots of repetitions may be needed before your cat will reliably perform the behavior on cue.

Tip: Keep training sessions short -- even 30 seconds at a time will do. Always try to end on a positive note.

Fourth Step: Up the Ante

Gradually require more from your cat to earn the click and treat. For example, have her perform two or three behaviors before rewarding her, increase the time or distance (not both) of your stay, work in a more distracting place, change your position in relation to your cat or reward the faster or straighter sit. Go ahead and praise your cat for correct responses, but instead of rewarding every response, reward the second, third, or fourth response.

Tip: Don't be discouraged if your cat seems to forget all of her training when she's in a new location. She may do it perfectly at home but then stare at you dumbfounded when you try to show off your training skills. Make it a little easier for her at first (go through the beginning steps again).

Tip: When you increase the difficulty of your training, also increase the value of the reward for a successful performance. Choose a better treat than the one you normally use for training.

Tip: Don't ask for too much too soon. If your cat is losing interest in the training session, take a short play break as a reward for an easier task, then resume your training.

Tip: There are LOTS of fun tricks you can teach your cat. Search online for cat clicker training videos to find new ideas.