

Many people feel that cats cannot be trained. They do what they want, when they want, and if you don't like it, that's tough. It may seem like this is the case, but cats can be trained, if you know how.

Many people think of cats as either small children, or small dogs, and try to train them accordingly. Verbal correction may work for kids, but when you yell at a cat, all you are doing is convincing her you are nuts. Dogs are often times very concerned with making you happy and seek to please you. Most cats would like you to be happy, but they have trouble understanding why lying on top of your newspaper while you're reading doesn't make you happy.

Behaviors that are often considered 'problems' are many times simply natural cat behavior. It is impossible to teach a young cat not to play, run and scratch. You can, however, redirect these behaviors appropriately so that they are not destructive. Many "behavior problems" can be avoided simply by following some common sense rules:

- Don't leave food out where the cat can get it. Food is a very powerful motivator for cats, and many will gobble up anything that is left lying out.
- Before you bring the cat home, put all your breakables away. After the cat has been there for a while, and you're comfortable that she won't break anything, you can bring them back out. Kittens and young adult cats are very, very active and should not be expected to be extra careful around the good china.
- If your cat is not allowed to do something sometimes, don't let her do it ever. Cats don't understand that it's ok to go on the couch when you're around, but not ok when you're gone. If it's not ok all the time, it should not be ok any of the time.
- NEVER, EVER HIT A CAT! Hitting a cat is cruel, abusive, dangerous and ineffective. The only thing you will teach her by hitting is that you are someone to be avoided. Many cats will respond by scratching or biting. Children should be taught from a young age that hitting or kicking a cat is absolutely unacceptable.
- Always remember that cats are not small, furry people. They aren't born understanding why it's not ok to urinate in the plants or climb the curtains. In fact, doing those things is pretty natural cat behavior. They need to be taught that some things are appropriate and some things are not.
- Nearly every cat can be trained to scratch appropriately. A good scratching post is just as important for a cat as a good litter box.
- Many cats (and people) feel that it's ok to play rough with a cat. Unfortunately, this can lead to cats that bite and scratch people. Cats should be taught from a young age that biting and scratching at people are not acceptable. Appropriate toys and games can usually retrain a cat that has a habit of getting too rough during play.
- Elimination outside the litter box is never done to spite the owner, or because the cat is mad at you. If your cat goes outside the litter box, there is something wrong. Yelling or rubbing her nose in the mess will only stress the cat further (and probably make the problem worse). Take some time to try and figure out what is going on. Does the cat have a urinary tract infection? Is the box dirty? Did you accidentally buy a different litter that she doesn't like? Have you been so busy that she hasn't gotten any attention lately? Most litter box problems can be solved without resorting to giving up the cat or euthanasia. Cats International (see Important Phone Numbers) can help.

There are really only two effective ways to train a cat: positive reinforcement and remote correction.

Positive reinforcement is simply rewarding the cat for the desired behavior. If the cat comes when you call, give her a treat. Eventually, she will learn that coming to your call means she gets a treat. Cats can be trained to do many tricks, such as ‘Sit’, ‘Down’, ‘Roll Over’, ‘Fetch’ and ‘Stay’. Keep in mind, however, that positive reinforcement can work against you. If digging in the garbage is rewarded (by finding leftover food), it will be hard to keep the cat from trying to do that again. Make sure all inappropriate sources of rewards are secured.

The ‘correction’ part of remote correction is based off the idea that if something unpleasant happens to the cat as a result of her action or behavior, she will be less likely to do that action or behavior again. The ‘remote’ part means that the correction should come from an undetermined source, most importantly, not you. The important thing is that the correction be remote. Correcting a cat in person usually only teaches the cat to do that behavior when you are not around (called owner absent behavior), and may make the cat afraid of you. Sometimes its hard not to yell at a cat when she has just knocked a plant over, but to her, knocking a plant over isn’t inherently bad. Yelling at her will just confuse and scare her.

A good example of remote correction is teaching your cat not to jump on counters. Put double sided tape on the edge of the counter. When the cat jumps up, her feet will stick to the tape (many cats hate this). She will quickly learn that jumping on the counter is unpleasant and, unless there is a great reward on the counter (food, treats, etc), will soon stop jumping there. In addition, the cat will not associate the unpleasant experience with you, because you probably weren’t even there when she jumped up.

Many people use a squirt gun to discipline their cat. While there certainly are worse ways to train a cat, squirt guns are rarely a cure-all. Unless you are able to follow the cat around 24 hours a day, you may just teach her to do the behavior when you’re not around. Since cats are smart enough to realize that you just squirted them, this is not a remote correction and the cat may become afraid of you. On the other hand, some cats have no fear of water so squirting has no effect. Also, a sudden blast of water in the face can lead to choking and respiratory problems.