

# ***“How-To Clicker Train Your Cat!”***

## ***Can I really “train” my cat?***

YES, YOU CAN! It is a common MYTH that cats cannot be trained to do tricks, such as shaking hands, and that cats will do whatever they want to do, regardless of the input from the people around them. Another common myth is that it is impossible to change behaviors in cats that are unwanted by their human care providers. Sadly, these common myths often have fatal consequences for the cats, as many cats are surrendered to shelters and/or euthanized for behavior problems that are resolvable.

## ***What “tricks” can I teach my cat using clicker training?***

Most cats enjoy learning because it’s mentally stimulating and strengthens the relationship between the cat and you. Cats can be taught tricks such as sitting, shaking hands, giving high fives, playing dead, jumping through hoops, closing and opening doors, as well as many others. Start by teach tricks based on natural cat behaviors like, jumping over a pole or through a hoop on cue because jumping is natural for a cat. Cats also flop, so an extension of the flop is teaching a cat to play dead when cued. Whether you use clicker training to modify behaviors or teach new ones, it needs to be fun for everyone– the cat and trainer both!

## ***What “unwanted behaviors” can I resolve using clicker training?***

Unwanted behaviors can be resolved successfully and, depending on the challenge, quickly through a combination of addressing the behavior triggers, environmental management, clicker training, and other positive reinforcement techniques. Clicker training is also an effective way of focusing the cat away from the causes of the unwanted behaviors, while giving the cat something more appropriate and fun to do.

Some typical unwanted behaviors in cats that you can use clicker training to resolve are: counter surfing, door darting, many types of aggressions, introducing a new cat to resident pets, furniture scratching, trauma-free visits to the vet, and socializing shy cats.

## ***How do I start?***

Assemble the 3 fundamental tools. These are: (1) a primary motivator, (2) a secondary conditioner, and, of course, most importantly...(3) a cat!

No. 1: A primary motivator is something so incredibly motivating that the cat will do just about anything for it. The easiest primary motivator to use is a treat. Since every cat is an individual, one cat’s treat may be unappetizing to another. Some cats love freeze-dried chicken, others love fish. Cats who love their regular food can be highly motivated to work for either a

small amount of canned food or for a piece of dry food. Primary motivators are small. A food treat can be as tiny as an eighth of an inch or one quarter of a piece of dry kibble. One lick from a spoonful of canned food is the perfect treat size for cat clicker training;

No. 2: The secondary conditioner is a device that always performs the same action every time it is activated. Our favorite secondary conditioner is a QT Click (also known as an “i-Click” clicker), available through [clickercompany.com](http://clickercompany.com) or the [clickertraining.com](http://clickertraining.com) store. It has a softer sound than other clickers and responds immediately when the button is pushed. Be aware that some shy and fearful cats startle easily. When working with shy kitties, wrap the clicker in a sock or put it in your pocket to muffle the sound. Holding the clicker behind your back will also soften the click. In a pinch, just a plain ‘ole clicking ball point pen also as a secondary conditioner. Whatever device you use, don’t click it indiscriminately, or it will lose its incredible power.

No. 3: Finally, you need a cat. Cats of all ages, including kittens and elderly cats, can be clicker trained easily. No matter the age of the cat, clicker training needs to be fun for everyone-cats and their clicker trainers alike. Never force a cat to participate. The motivator might not be motivating enough or something else might grab the cat’s attention.

### ***When is the best time to try clicker training my cat?***

The best times to clicker train cats are when they are the most motivated. If food is the primary motivator (see No. 1 above), then working with your cat right after the cat’s dinner may not be the best idea unless the treat is something the cat is crazy about. Then there are those cats who just don’t care about food or treats, but may love to be groomed, petted or get any kind of positive attention. These cats can be motivated with one brush stroke or a quick cuddle...any type of positive attention from you.

In the early stages of clicker training, the sessions are short. A session may consist of only five or six repetitions, after which the cat might become distracted or just not want to participate. This is normal. Stop the session, give the cat a break, and try again later. Expect to have many short clicker sessions when you start clicker training your cat. Try not to have a session go longer than 2 minutes when you first start out.

### ***How do I “charge” the clicker?”***

After assembling the basics, you need to pair the secondary conditioner, the clicker, with the primary motivator, the treat. It's easy! Simply click and then toss your cat a small treat. Wait until she eats the treat and makes eye contact before you click and treat her again. It can take between 5 and 20 repetitions until the cat has a strong positive association with the clicker. The clicker, once paired with the treat, becomes a powerful communication tool, communicating to the cat when she is doing a desired behavior. We call this initial phase: “charging the clicker.”

Now you are ready to try a clicker training session like we demonstrated for you here today! Try a basic “sit” first, since this is a behavior your cat naturally performs and is a behavior you can wait for the cat to do on its own, then click and treat! The next steps are training the cat to touch a target, such as a chopstick or pencil; to stand on a location or object, such as a place-mat, when cued. Also, target and mat training are effective tools for changing other bad behaviors such as counter surfing, door darting, and some aggressions.

### ***What’s an example of how to clicker train a cat to resolve an unwanted behavior?***

It's important to understand the cause(s) of an unwanted behavior before attempting to stop or change it. After the triggers are understood thoroughly, address the reasons for the behavior, modify the environment as needed, and give the cat something more appropriate to do that satisfies the behavior needs. Clicker training is a fantastic tool that will help accomplish this. It focuses the cat away from the unwanted behavior and its triggers, and also reinforces the cat for an appropriate, alternative behavior.

Destructive furniture scratching is one of many unwanted behaviors with which clicker training can help. The first step in stopping the behavior is to understand the reasons that cats scratch. Since there are scent glands located on the bottom of paw pads, when cats scratch they are marking territory and broadcasting information about themselves to other animals. Cats will scratch when they are feeling conflicted; they also scratch when they’re playing. Scratching is an energy-release and cats stretch and scratch after a satisfying nap. And, of course, cats give themselves perfect manicures when they scratch. Cats have to scratch. The good news is that cats can be taught to stay away from human furniture and focus on cat furniture with their scratching.

Stopping a cat from destroying the furniture starts by making the targeted scratch areas unavailable to sharp claws, while simultaneously addressing the cat’s instinctual need to scratch. **Of course, the cat has to be versed in basic clicker training, too.** Cover the target area, such as the sofa, with something that the cat doesn’t particularly want to scratch. Sheets and other materials that are hard for cats to sink their claws into work well, too. When making an area off limits, place another more appropriate scratching surface, such as a tall scratching post, directly in front of the blocked area. The scratching post needs to be both appealing to the cat and a different material and texture than the sofas and rugs. Scratching posts should be tall enough for the cat to stretch up and scratch, and they need to be sturdy so that the cat can’t pull them down. When the cat finds he can’t scratch the sofa, he will start scratching the post that is in front of the blocked target area.

With repetition, the act of scratching the appropriate surfaces will become self-rewarding. Clicker training works for reinforcing good scratching etiquette. Click while your cat is scratching the post and then give him a treat, reinforcing him for scratching the appropriate cat furniture. Every time you see him scratching the right surface, click and then treat. Timing is

crucial. Clicking after or before he scratches isn't very effective because the click reinforces whatever behavior she is doing at the instant of the click.

Focusing on repetition, it won't be long before your cat will learn the act of scratching the appropriate surfaces because this will become self-rewarding, especially when the previously targeted objects aren't fun to scratch. When the cat is scratching the cat furniture habitually, gradually decrease the use of the clicker. Treats can be phased out slowly, replaced with verbal praise, like "Yes!"

The scratching post won't have to live forever in the middle of the living room. After your cat is demonstrating excellent scratching habits for a few weeks, the post can be moved slowly, one inch at a time and on a daily basis, to another location in the room. Other furniture protectors do not have to be adhered on your furniture permanently either. Gradually remove them, after your cat is scratching the approved cat furniture consistently.

### ***Some last cat clicker training tips:***

**\*Click during the desired behavior, not after it. Timing is crucial, because the click sound may actually cause the cat to terminate the behavior in anticipation of a treat.**

\*Begin with something easy that your cat is likely to do on his own (sit, come, touch your hand with his paw or nose, scratch on his scratching post, or follow a target object like a wand or pencil).

\*Only click once per behavior. Multiple clicks can confuse your cat.

\*Keep your cat training sessions very short (2 minutes max when starting out)

\*Focus on coaxing or luring your cat into a position area; never push him or pick him up to move him. Your cat's movements should be voluntary, even if accidental, he'll gradually associate the click with the movement you're training him for, whether it's sitting or jumping on a stool.

\*Start by rewarding for small movements toward your goal, and then shape a behavior by raising the goal. For example, if you're training your cat to enter his carrier, at first you'll reward for any steps he takes in the direction near the carrier, then for walking right up to the carrier, then for entering it.

\*The simple click, along with other behavior tools and management, can help socialize a fearful cat, assist cats in overcoming their hatred and fears of cat carriers, and change unwanted behaviors such as furniture scratching and some aggressions. Clicker training all builds from that simple click.

\*Clicker training can also benefit elderly cats suffering from cognitive dysfunctions.

\*DON'T PUNISH UNWANTED "BAD" BEHAVIOR! Instead, refocus your cat on good behaviors by rewarding them. For example, instead of punishing a cat for scratching on the furniture, reward him for using his designated scratching post. (You can begin by rewarding him just for being near the post.)

***\*\*Presented by: Caroline L. Kaufmann for Purrfect Friends for Adoption, Inc., and Katy McClellan for Just Plain Cats Rescue, In Honor of Purrfect Friends' rescue kitten "Silva" (2/28/13-4/22/13)***

