

Choosing and Using Reinforcers

In positive reinforcement training, immediately after a cat completes a behavior we want to see again, we give something to the cat that she likes to increase the likelihood that she will do that behavior again. *What we give the cat is called a reinforcer.* There are two types of reinforcers you will need to use: secondary and primary reinforcers.

Secondary Reinforcers: Making Training “Click”

A secondary reinforcer is the signal telling the cat she correctly performed the behavior and something she likes is on the way. This allows us to specifically “mark” the exact moment she successfully finishes the behavior. You may hear a secondary reinforcer referred to as a “marker” signal. Any marker signals should be unique but not scary to the cat.

Common secondary reinforcers are the click of a clicker, the sound of a whistle, or the word, “Yes!” If a cat is deaf, we might use a specific hand signal. Choose only one marker signal per training session.

When you use a secondary reinforcer after the cat successfully completes a behavior, *you must follow it as quickly as you can with a primary reinforcer.* This gives the secondary reinforcer meaning for the cat, indicating they did something correctly and a primary reinforcer is coming momentarily.

Primary Reinforcers: Food, Toys, Fun!

A primary reinforcer is anything the cat will work for in order to get. Primary reinforcers fall into three categories:

- Consumables: items that can be eaten such as commercially available cat treats, kibble, canned cat food, meat-based baby foods, or lean meats.
- Objects: objects that the cat enjoys such as toys (e.g. wand toys, mice, balls), scratching areas, or hiding boxes.
- Interaction/Activities: petting, games (e.g. fetch, chasing wand toy), quiet time, or brushing

You can observe which items or activities your cat chooses to engage with on their own. It is often easiest to use consumables as reinforcers, but some cats may prefer objects or interaction/activities to food. Also, cats on restricted diets may require non-consumable reinforcers. For these cats, always check with your veterinary staff to determine if there are any appropriate consumable reinforcers before training.

Using Primary Reinforcers

When using primary reinforcers, there are some guidelines to keep in mind. Reinforcers are:

- **Defined by the cat:** Whether or not something is reinforcing is *up to the cat*, not you. Be careful not to use your own value system about what you think the cat should like. If you are unsure if a cat likes something, present it and see if they engage or withdraw. If they engage, it is potentially useful as a reinforcer.
- **Situationally specific:** If the cat has had her fill of a specific reinforcer, it may no longer be useful as reinforcer. For example, food will be less reinforcing right after a big meal or chasing a wand toy might be less reinforcing after a tiring vet visit.
- **Location sensitive:** Where you provide the reinforcer matters. If you consistently provide a reinforcer in a specific location, the cat will expect it there again. And, it is best not to deliver a food treat to the cat from your hands. It is best to use a spoon, tongue depressor, or just place it on the floor. This will prevent any accidental bites or scratches.
- **Of varying value:** You can think of the value of reinforcers like money. Some are one cent treats while others may be worth \$10 to the cat. Also, realize that 100 one cent treats do not equal a \$1 treat! Know what the cats “Top Ten” treats are and use them accordingly. You may want to use lower value treats for easy behaviors or those behaviors they know very well (i.e. have been trained and on cue with for a long time).

Predictability and Variety

Also remember that you may want to consider the pros and cons of predictability with reinforcers. Predictability can work in your favor (if a reinforcer is desired by an animal) or can work against you (the animal is bored with or full of that specific reinforcer and needs more variety).

Variety is the not only the spice of life, it is the spice of training too! Knowing she is going to get something good is a positive feeling for the cat. It is good that the secondary reinforcer predicts that a primary reinforcer is coming soon. It is more exciting if the cat doesn't know which amazing thing from their “Top Ten” list is going to appear!

Just think about playing a slot machine. You aren't sure how much you are going to win, but you keep pushing the button to spin the slots to find out. Sometimes the cat might win a piece of tuna, or a favorite treat, or a toss of the mouse, or a game of fetch. How exciting! This type of variety allows you the power of surprise within the predictability that something good is coming!

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