



Using reward-based training isn't just for dogs it can also be a great way to positively socialize with our feline friends. Here are some fun exercises you can try!

## Reward-Based Training

You can also use reward-based training to help socialize your kittens, fearful cats, or more generally as a fun enrichment to keep them challenged. Over time, the consistent use of positive reinforcement can help change a cat's perception of people – from fearful to positive. A process known as counter-conditioning.

## Treat Toss

This simple exercise helps encourage your cat or kitten to approach and interact with people. Practise this in a quiet area in your household.

### Steps:

1. Get some treats.
2. Sit away from your cat or kitten (e.g. on the opposite side of the room) and toss a treat in their direction.
3. Wait for them to get the treat. When they do, verbally praise them in a quiet, pleasant tone.
4. Gently toss another treat close to your cat or kitten.
5. Repeat the above steps, gradually tossing the treats closer to you.

It may take several of these treat tossing sessions for your feline to become comfortable getting close to you, especially if they are a bit fearful at first. Over time, your cat or kitten will start to associate your presence with something positive happening - getting treats!

## Target Training

Target training with positive reinforcement is a great way to bond with your cat or kitten! It can also help you easily guide them into a kennel, walking onto an exam table at the veterinary clinic, or other useful activities in a low-stress manner.

**Note:** Do not try this with an undersocialized kitten, until they become comfortable being around and handled by people.

### You will need:

- Optional: Target stick
  - **Note:** A target stick is a long stick with a small rubber ball at the end which you can find at most pet stores or make on your own.
- Clicker
- Treats



### Steps:

If your cat has not been clicker trained, start with steps 1-4. If your cat is already clicker trained, then proceed to step 5!

1. Gather some treats, your clicker, and a target stick if you wish to use one.
2. First, you will need to condition your cat or kitten to the clicker – meaning, you need to teach them that the “click” sound = treat!
  - a. **Note:** You can alternatively use wet food on a spoon instead of dry treats.
3. Click your clicker, then immediately drop a treat.
4. Repeat this several times until your cat or kitten starts to anticipate a treat after they hear the “click” sound. Once they have gotten the hang of this, then you can introduce the targeting behaviour.
5. Hold out your target stick for them to investigate. If your cat or kitten makes any motion towards the target stick, click your clicker and drop a treat.
  - a. **Note:** If you don’t have a target stick, you can simply hold out your finger. In this case, the goal is to have your finger be the touch target.
  - b. **Note:** If your cat or kitten is not initially interested in the target stick or your finger, rub a bit of wet cat food on the target or your finger.
6. Repeat the above step, clicking every time your cat or kitten moves close towards the target stick. Ultimately, you want them to just touch their nose to the target stick for a treat reward.

With a few repeated sessions, they will learn that when they see the target stick (or if you extend out your finger) they will get a treat if they touch the target. You can use the target to station your cat or kitten wherever you may want them to go.

For example, at the veterinary clinic, you can bring your target stick and use it to guide them onto the exam table, or into their carrier before and after their veterinary exam.

## High Five

Teaching your cat how to give a “high-five” is an easy trick and helps to mentally stimulate your cat through reward-based training.

**Note:** Do not try this with an undersocialized kitten, until they become comfortable being around and handled by people.

### You will need:

- Clicker
- Treats

### Steps:

If your cat has not been clicker trained, start with steps 1-4. If your cat is already clicker trained, proceed to step 5!

1. Gather some treats and your clicker.
2. First, you will need to condition your cat or kitten to the clicker – teaching them that the “click” sound = treat!
  - a. **Note:** You can alternatively use wet food on a spoon instead of dry treats.
3. Click your clicker, then immediately drop a treat.
4. Repeat this several times until your cat or kitten starts to anticipate a treat after they hear the “click” sound. Once they have gotten the hang of this, then you can start teaching this trick.
5. Ideally, start with your cat in a sitting position. Hold a treat in a closed palm at your cat’s shoulder level. Most cats will be naturally intrigued by the smell of the treat. Wait for your cat to sniff and paw at your hand.
6. As soon as they lift their paw slightly off the ground, click and reward your cat with a treat!
7. After the treat is consumed, reset, and try again. The goal is for your cat to raise their paw and touch your hand. To achieve this, gradually reward them when raising their paw a bit higher each time, until they eventually touch your hand.
  - a. **Note:** Some cats may immediately try to paw your hand, while others may take a few minutes or sessions to catch on. Encouraging them to sit initially with a treat also helps.
8. When your cat starts to get the hang of touching your palm for a treat, you can begin to present your open palm (in a high five) position and give the verbal cue “high five”! Click and reward your cat as soon as they touch your hand with their paw!
9. Over time, your cat will learn that your open palm and verbal cue “high five” = paw for a treat!

## What to AVOID

In summary, here are some things to avoid when target-training your cat or kitten:

- Having a lot of activity in the household. Try to keep activity or distractions minimal when your cat is undergoing training. This will help them be more focused and engaged with you.
- Not rewarding your cat. Ensure you reward for every attempt at performing the desired behaviour. Positive reinforcement helps to create motivation – pay your cat with treats!
- Getting frustrated with your cat. If your cat is not interested in participating, that’s ok! They may be a bit fearful or distracted, so try again later in a quiet environment. Try short training sessions (e.g. 5 minutes) and more frequently, rather than longer sessions less often.

### Did You Know?

You can also ask us behavioural questions by emailing:  
[askthespecialist@edmontonhumanesociety.com](mailto:askthespecialist@edmontonhumanesociety.com)

It takes approximately \$7 million to keep the Edmonton Humane Society operational for one year and 40% of these funds come from generous donations made by supporters like you. Please [Donate](#).