



## How Cats Learn: Insights Into Feline Adolescence

I have a little-known secret that will help you: Understanding how cats learn and communicate will help you to better train and communicate with your feline family member. How your adolescent cat learns is at the heart of this.

### Learning 101

#### What Is Learning?

While some animal behaviors are instinctive, the ability to learn from experience is one of the animal kingdom's common threads. Some scientists believe that *any* animal with a nervous system can learn! How your cat learns is not that different from other species of animals.

#### How Cats Learn

Learning is a process that all living things go through, even your cat! During that process, the learner (your cat) picks up new skills. How individual cats do so varies. Your adolescent cat may learn from:

- Personal experiences
- Another animal
- Parents
- Siblings
- Trial and error
- Playing
- Hunting
- Genetics
- Observational Learning
- Environmental Changes

*At the adolescent stage, cats learn primarily from each other making socialization essential. Keeping kittens or adolescent cats in pairs and/or with an older cat as a guide can be helpful for your adolescent cat. – Dr. Elizabeth, Just Cats Clinic*

## **Chemistry**

Cats don't do chemistry, but how your cat learns depends on it. As with all species of animals, learning involves a change in molecular chemistry. That change results in long-term behavior modifications. Here's why this science matters to you and your cat: Behaviors that you consider "acceptable" and "unacceptable" are both learned. Once your cat learns a behavior, it can be difficult to reverse it because a chemical change has occurred in your cat's brain.

## **Learning Together**

### **Get Ahead of Your Cat's Learning Curve**

If you want to better communicate with and train your cat, here's the secret: teach your cat what you *want* him to do before he has a chance to learn to do something that you *don't* want him to do. It's always going to be easier for a cat to learn an appropriate behavior than having to learn how to *stop* doing an inappropriate behavior. This goes back to the chemical changes that happen in a cat's brain.

### **What Is Your Cat Learning from You?**

The question I always encourage cat guardians to ask is, "What Am I Teaching My Cat?" Here are a few questions that I have asked myself over the years:

- What messages am I sending to my cat when I allow behaviors one day, but don't allow them the next?
- What am I teaching my cat when I don't reward behaviors that I want to see more of?
- When can I reward better choices that my cat make?
- How can I create an environment in which it's easier for my cat to make better choices?
- Where can I compromise?
- What is my body language telling my cat?
- How can I set myself and my cat up for success?

When I answer these questions honestly, I can start to understand what I am teaching my cat and where I need to improve.

### **Lost In Translation**

I hear phrases similar to this all too often: "My cat is not very bright", or "My cat doesn't seem to learn anything". I will let you in on a little known feline fact: cats are incredibly smart. I have lived and worked with countless of them, and I can tell you from experience that they are all brilliant. If your cat is not learning what you're trying to teach her, the message is either lost in

translation or it's not being delivered consistently. Let's look at a few common examples of a message being lost in translation that you might experience at home:

- Does your roommate or spouse allow your cat to sleep on the bed, but you don't?
- When your cat begs for food, do you sometimes give her what she wants, but tell her no at other times?
- When your cat jumps up on the counter, do you sometimes get annoyed and swat him away, but at other times hug and smooch on him before putting her on the ground?
- When your cat demonstrates a behavior that you like, do you reward her every time for it, or do you sometimes ignore the behavior?

### **Cats need Consistency**

When a cat doesn't do what her guardian wants, the cat is often labeled as stupid or stubborn, but what may be happening is that the cat is experiencing a lack of consistency in what she is being taught. For example, if your adolescent cat is repeating a particular behavior that you don't like, then it's possible that someone in your home is reinforcing that behavior without your knowledge. My advice is to sit down as a family, set rules for how you want to address your cat's behavior, make sure everyone understands them, and then stick to them. This eliminates inconsistency.

### **Cat Communication**

Most of us don't naturally speak feline, but once we learn cat language, we can better communicate with them! Your cat is always communicating with you, but do you know the signals? Here are just a few ways that your cat communicates with you every day. Each behavior will vary depending on your cat's mood, emotional state, and physical well-being:

- Eyes
- Purring
- Vocalizations
- Body language (ears, tail, whiskers)

Once you learn these cat communication clues, you'll be better at listening to your cat!

### **Cats Can Learn!**

Your cat can learn just about anything that you want to teach him. Most of my family, friends, and clients once believed otherwise; however, they kept an open mind, were willing to try new things, and were amazed to learn what their cats were capable of! Over the years, I have found these techniques to be most helpful when trying to help a cat learn:

- Set your cat up to succeed!
- Encourage and reward behavior you want to see more of

- Ignore behaviors that you wish to see less of
- Redirect unwanted behavior (onto a behavior that's more desirable)
- Avoid physical and verbal corrections

Patience, insight, understanding, and love have been my best tools to live and learn harmoniously with our feline family members.

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