



Feline School 101: How Adult Cats Learn, and how you can learn with them!

Would you like to learn how to communicate better with your cat? I have a good feeling you would! Many years ago I would get so frustrated because I felt as if my cats were either ignoring me or not understanding anything I was saying. Fortunately, thanks to science and experience, I learned how cats communicate, how they learn, and how to better listen to them.

The Science of Learning

All species on Earth learn the same way. Scientists define *learning* as “a relatively permanent change in behavior that results from experience”. Whether it’s a poison dart frog, a blue whale, an octopus, a human, or your cat, we all learn through experiences. Some are observational and some are trial and error. Usually, learning occurs gradually and in steps.

Environmental Changes and Learning

Adult cats learn by being able to respond and adapt to their changing environment. When a cat’s environment changes, her particular behaviors may no longer achieve results that they once did. The cat is now forced to change her behavior, and does so by learning which responses gets her the desired results.

Stress and Learning

Through scientific study, we now know that physiological stress impedes the ability to learn. Research shows that a stress response is often elicited when punishment is used to try to change behavior, which hinders the learner’s ability (and willingness) to learn or demonstrate a desired behavior.

Hierarchy of Learning

Thanks to Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), we have learned that most effective way for cats to learn is by using a hierarchy of teaching interventions. That may sound complicated, but it’s really pretty simple! If you want your cat to learn something, your goal is to:

- Use the most positive, least intrusive solutions
- Avoid punishment
- Help your cat to learn to make better choices
- Reward those choices

How to help your cat learn from you!

Catch them doing something GOOD!

Once you make an effort to catch your cat in the act of doing something good, you'll be on your way to teaching your cat what you want him to do! I have found that by teaching my adult cats that behaviors I prefer to see will receive my positive attention and undesirable behaviors will not. By ignoring behaviors that I didn't like (or that were driving me insane) and rewarding the behaviors that I preferred, I was able to transform inappropriate behavior into polite manners. If you practice that approach consistently, you'll find that many nuisance behaviors will begin to decrease. I can tell you from firsthand experience that this approach is incredibly effective.

"At the adult stage, learning occurs by establishing the relationship between behavior and consequence, either positive or negative. The best method is positive reinforcement where the favored behavior is met with a positive consequence including treats, attention, or play. But it is the most effective with whatever motivates your cat; for example if he/she likes their head scratched or likes to interact and play with a particular toy, that may motivate them more than a treat would" – Dr. Elizabeth Arguelles, Just Cats Clinic

Communicate with your cat

Did you know that one of the best ways to communicate with your cat is through training? Training enables cat guardians to communicate with their cat in a language that they can *both* understand. Most people believe that training a cat is telling a cat what to do, or what not to do, but it's much more than that. Training is teaching and learning together! Fun, positive training has been one of the best forms of communication with my cats at home!

Tips to better train your cat and communicate better together

1. Learn Cat Behavior.

Your goal: "Listen" to your cat by observing them.

How: Learn the many behavioral and vocal cues of cats.

2. Make Better Behaviors Easier

Your goal: Set your cat up for success!

How: Set up the environment by creating scenarios where particular behaviors are more or less likely to occur. Make it easier for your cat to do the behavior that you want her to do!

3. Say Goodbye to Unwanted Behaviors

Your Goal: Ignore behavior you don't want to see.

How: Avoid giving your attention to the unwanted behavior. Redirect unwanted behavior and encourage alternative ones.

4. Accentuate the Positive!

Your Goal: Focus on behavior that you *like*!

How: Teach your cat what you want her to do, rather than focusing on what you *don't* want her to do. Reward your cat for behaviors that you want to see happen more often!

Your Cat is Always Learning from You

Once you become aware of that fact that your cat is always learning from you, you will start to notice so many opportunities where you can better communicate and train your cat! You have the power to influence what your cat learns! I have found that these principles allowed me and my cats to learn from each other and communicate better together:

- ✓ Establish a relationship based on trust and respect.
- ✓ Communicate together in a new language that you both understand!

If you can create these conditions, you and your adult cat will be able to communicate better with one another, you'll both see desired results, and be on your way to a lifetime of happiness together!

Amy Martin
Conscious Companion
504.214.9119

