



You *can* teach an old cat new tricks!

How to Train Your Senior Cat with Honor and Ease

By Amy Martin (Conscious Companion) November 28, 2014

Age does not have to get in the way of your senior cat's learning! They're capable of learning new behaviors, and with the right tools, patience, insight, and compromise, you and your senior cat can learn together and find peace and harmony.

Lost In Translation

Every species has its own form of communication, but the message is often lost in translation when two different species try to communicate. While most cat guardians do not speak cat, we can actively *listen* to our senior cats when we observe their behavior. This is how we start the process of training, because training is all about communication.

Senior Cats Learn By Doing What Works.

Let's face it. Cats, in general, *do what works for them*. Moreover, senior cats do what's most convenient to them, repeating behaviors they find rewarding. Unfortunately, this doesn't always go over well with cat guardians.

No matter what the frustrating behavior is, if it's working for your senior cat, he's going to continue it. Some behaviors can make even the most loving cat guardians become frustrated and resort to punishment. But here's what you need to know: using punishment or aversive (physical punishment) methods to stop your senior cat's unwanted behavior is not going to produce the results that you want.

There isn't a "good" way to discipline your senior cat.

Years ago I learned that punishing my senior cat for behaviors that I didn't like was the worst thing I could do. Some examples:

- He didn't tolerate aversive punishment.
- Punishment made things worse.
- The added stress created more unwanted behaviors!
- Punishing him for behaviors I didn't like did not *stop* the behaviors - It only suppressed them momentarily.
- Our bond degraded quickly.
- Punishment never taught him what I wanted from him.

Training Truth: Animals trained using aversive methods are 15 times more likely to exhibit symptoms of stress than those trained using positive, reward-based techniques.

When we punish our senior cat for a behavior we don't like, they don't understand why. They don't connect the dots between being punished and their "bad" behavior. What they experience is their guardian being mad at them. This results in a cat who connects the punishment to the one who's doing the punishing, rather than to the behavior itself. Can you imagine how confusing this must be to a senior cat?

"The problem with punishment is that it doesn't teach the learner [the cat] *what* to do, and the side effects that can be experienced by the individual being punished are detrimental." -Dr. Susan Friedman, Utah State University, Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)

Training that Works for You and Your Senior Cat

Senior cats need guidance. When we show them what we want them to do, this sets them up for success. Senior cats who are given the opportunity to make better choices feel in control of their environment, which helps them to be more relaxed, less stressed, and less frustrated. A senior cat who is less stressed is less likely to exhibit negative behaviors or develop health issues. Force-free, positive reinforcement training allows this to happen.

"For senior cats, behavior modification is the most difficult and truly just depends on the cat. Positive reinforcement is the best remedy at this stage as well." - Just Cats Clinic, Dr. Elizabeth Arguelles

Do we want our senior cat to continue behaviors that work for him/ her, but upset us in the process, or do we want to see behaviors that work for her and us? Do you want to be the owner that punishes your senior cat, or the cat guardian that rewards your cat?

Cats Appreciate Compromise.

I teach my clients to meet their senior cat half way. Cats respond extremely well to compromise. The human and the cat get what they want, and both are happy with the results. Let's use furniture scratching as an example. This is a very necessary feline behavior, and one that's getting your cat what she wants. Taking those two facts into consideration, how can we stop the unwanted behavior while finding a compromise?

Here's how:

- Prevent access to the thing that your senior cat is scratching.
- Provide an appropriate (and equally valuable) alternative for your cat to scratch.
- Place it next to the thing your cat was scratching.
- Praise and reward your cat when she scratches on the alternative scratching option.

Are there ways that you can compromise with your senior cat?

Accentuate the Positive!

I understand how easy it is to stay mad and frustrated when your senior cat's behavior is disrupting your life, but we don't have to stay in that negative space. When we choose to focus on the behaviors that we want to see more of, we create the space to allow our cats to make better choices! Positive (reward-based) training focuses on the *positive* things that are taking place. It removes the frustration associated with what's going wrong, and helps you to see *what's going right*.

Here's an example. Our senior cat, Albert, had a habit of hanging around the kitchen under foot while I was making the cats' and dog's meals. I would literally trip over him, or stumble while trying to avoid tripping on him. It was incredibly frustrating and dangerous for both of us. I used to get upset and holler at him to "get out!" I soon realized that this method wasn't teaching him what I wanted him to do. It was only upsetting him, myself, and the other members of our household. So I decided to show Albert *what I wanted him to do* instead! I trained Albert to go to "his place" while I made his meals. This is how I did it (and how you can too!):

- When Albert was in the kitchen under foot, I completely ignored him.
- When he walked out of the kitchen, I rewarded him with praise and food.
- As he walked to the place I wanted him to go, I paired his behavior of going to that spot with the phrase "Go to your place." Then I rewarded him with food.
- When he sat at his "place," he received his meal there.
- Now he waits patiently for me to make his meal and bring it to him at "his place."

Honoring the Elderly.

Training our senior cats the force-free way completely transformed our relationship. Training based on trust, rewards, patience, and compromise is essential to having a peaceful and happy life with senior cats. They need clear communication and compromise. When we honor their needs, and allow them to make choices, we create a space for peace and harmony in our home. I hope that you will find new ways to honor your senior cat. Force-Free training is a great place to start!

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