



## *Behavior Modification for Cats in Shelters and Foster Homes*

### **Live Webcast Audience Q&A**

**By Dr. Sara Bennett**

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**1) Q: Can you recommend any training modules for use with cat volunteers in shelters?**

A: For those volunteers wishing to interact with or participate in training and behavior modification for cats with behavior problems in shelters, some background in feline body language should be a requirement. We are speaking different languages, so in order to understand what the cat is trying to convey and how to respond, we must understand the cat's language. There are a series of excellent articles on feline body language found here: <http://avsabonline.org/blog/view/articles-on-cat-body-language>  
There are several resources online on the fundamental physical dynamics for clicker training online. Resources include <http://drsophiayin.com/blog/tag/clicker+training> and [www.clickertraining.com](http://www.clickertraining.com)

**2) Q: Do you control feedings in a shelter setting if you know you're going to train with a cat, i.e., feed a little less at breakfast if getting training that morning?**

A: While it can be helpful for the pet to be a little more hungry so they are motivated to train, given that these pets are already in a stressful situation and having a predictable daily routine can help alleviate stress, I would refrain from withholding a meal because a training session is scheduled that day. You could schedule your training session to occur just prior to a regularly scheduled meal or you could withhold highly desired canned food or treats to use for reward. Of course if the canned food is necessary to entice a stressed cat to eat, it should not be withheld, but rather other measures taken to try to reduce that cat's stress via environmental modification.

**3) Q: For a cat to reach out through the cage to a person outside. It isn't intuitively obvious the small steps one would take one by one to lead a cat to the desired outcome. Can you explain the steps?**

A: This is a case where a combination of response substitution and management are key. First, management. How can we set the environment up to prevent him from practicing this behavior? Can we move him to a lower traffic area so fewer people are walking by? Can we create a buffer zone around his cage so that people are not passing so close by that he can reach them? Can he be placed in office foster?

Second, response substitution. Think of a behavior that is physically incompatible with what you don't want him to do. Can he jump up on his perch or bat a hanging toy instead of reach through the bars? Set up training sessions to teach him this new behavior. Once he has learned it, put it on a verbal cue.

Third, set him up for success. Place signage and an easily accessible container of his favorite treat near his cage. The signage can say something like this, “Please ignore me if I reach out of the cage to you. Instead, ask me to “Go to Bed!” and see what a cool trick I can do! You can give me a treat if you like what I do...”

**4) Q: Would you recommend feeding shelter cats in quarantine directly after medicating in order to have a positive association with giving medication?**

A: This is an excellent way to apply classical conditioning, especially if the cat really likes the food offered. Make sure to check with your veterinary staff beforehand, to ensure that the medication doesn't need to be given on an empty stomach.

**5) Q: Are clickers effective when working with a cat while many other cats in the room, i.e., does it cause confusion to the cats that are not being worked with?**

A: This is a common question, whether working with shelter cats housed in the same room or dogs attending a clicker training class. Even if you are training multiple animals in the same space using the clicker, the animals soon learn to differentiate which clicks are for them vs. someone else. Our orientation to the pet in training typically is the cue that clues them in. We have successfully run labs at our local shelter with several students clicker training different cats at the same time without confusing the cats.

**6) Q: What do you do to stop a kitten from biting you?**

A: This depends entirely on the motivation for the reason the kitten is biting. Is he biting in fear of your handling? In play with hands? Because he wants you to stop petting him? Is this part of an inappropriate play sequence where he is sneaking up and biting your ankle? Use the context of the interaction (or lack thereof) and the kitten's body language to help you determine this. Once you have identified the motivation and trigger, you can apply the behavior modification techniques, along with management, to set up a plan to change this behavior pattern.

**7) Q: So with a cat in the shelter who becomes aggressive after shutting a cage door, the best way to work with her is to interact with her so as not to reinforce the behavior?**

A: See Question 3. For management, this is a setting where tossing a toy or treats in the back of the cage just before putting the cat away can help prevent him from practicing this behavior.

**8) Q: Is the flooding counterconditioning technique considered negative reinforcement? And is this unnecessarily cruel?**

A: Flooding is a form of classical conditioning while negative reinforcement is a form of operant conditioning. Often times, classical and operant conditioning are occurring at the same time. Because both techniques involve increasing fear and anxiety to modify the behavior, especially in a pet that is likely already stressed, they would be considered less welfare friendly techniques and both could have the potential to make the problem behavior worse, especially if it is motivated out of fear and anxiety. We discuss them so

that you are able to recognize them, but we have more humane and welfare friendly techniques to change behavior that we should focus on trying to utilize. See also Questions 16, 17 and 18.

**9) Q: Could you give some specific examples of negative reinforcement, positive punishment and negative punishment?**

A: Negative reinforcement: Removing something to increase the frequency of a behavior.

From a trainings session standpoint, this is a little more challenging to implement with a cat than a dog or horse, and probably, in reality, is not really a bad thing for the cat. An example that occurs inadvertently frequently, is backing away from a cat showing aggression. I am in no way implying that you should not back away from an aggressive animal, but repeatedly presenting the situation where the cat is triggered to defend himself then the person backing away over and over again does fit this quadrant. The person's presence is removed when the cat shows aggression, therefore the cat will show more aggression in the future because this strategy results in the effect the cat wants.

Positive punishment: Adding something to a situation to reduce the frequency of a behavior.

This is a frequently attempted to be applied to cats, but is often ineffective because the criteria for effective use is not met. Examples of attempts include: spraying the cat with water when it jumps on the counter or yelling at the cat when it knocks something over.

Negative punishment: Removing something from the situation to reduce the frequency of a behavior.

This is frequently used to modify behavior in conjunction with positive reinforcement. Examples include: standing up and walking away from a play session when a kitten uses his mouth or claws while playing, walking away from a cage front if a cat reaches out to grab you. As you can imagine, this technique is most effective if you then immediately reward the cat for some alternate behavior that you would prefer him to do (positive reinforcement), reward him with continued play if he engages in a feather wand or chases a ball tossed, or in the cage situation, if he sits at the front of the cage as you approach.

**10) Q: What type of food rewards do you recommend for shelter cats and what is the easiest behavior to start with?**

A: My unofficial feline poll tells me that most cats love Feline Greenies treats, Temptations, a variety of canned food (I let the cat choose) and cheese (squeeze cheese isn't just for dogs anymore). But this is a good place to set up a treat preference test with what you've got on hand at the shelter. If someone donated a lot of Kong salmon paste, some of the cats might really love that.

The easiest behavior to start with is what we started with for George. Targeting an object with his nose. This is a behavior that involves low movement and is pretty benign from an interaction standpoint, so it is safe from the cat's point of view. If you are working on

the shy cat in the back of the cage, it might be as subtle as a slight head turn in your direction to start.

**11) Q: If a cat is not particularly food motivated, how effective will other motivators be during clicker training?**

A: It really depends on the cat. Even if a cat isn't terribly motivated by food, it doesn't mean something else, like a feather toy, won't be rewarding. If the cat is extremely stressed, it won't likely be interested in much of anything at that moment, so that is a case where managing the environment to try to reduce stress is really a requirement first.

**12) Q: What steps should be taken to introduce a new cat to a dog that's already in the home?**

A: Managing the environment and the level of exposure is key here to get them started off on the right track. The cat should be allowed to acclimate to a safe space (e.g., a room with bed, food, water, litterbox, scratch post and toys) first. Then baby gates (sometimes stacked) can be placed in that doorway. The dog should be on leash and calm, a distance away from the door that she will be less likely to react to the cat. If the cat chooses to hide, allow him. Ask the dog for cues to help maintain her focus on you. Toss treats to the cat if he ventures out to take a look or investigate. Reward both for remaining calm. The cat should always have access to a safe spot the dog cannot get to (here is a great place for the gate) and the dog should be leashed and actively directly supervised until she is calm and relaxed around the cat and the cat is calm and relaxed around her. If either pet is highly reactive or fearful of the other, you may want to talk to your friendly behavior specialist for additional advice. Above all, do not use positive punishment for either the dog or cat.

**13) Q: Can you train a cat not to run when a dog is present? Is that too difficult because a cat's natural fear overrides any possible training?**

A: This is extremely challenging. The cat is likely running because he is afraid, an innate and normal response when feeling threatened by a predator. It is best to manage the environment to decrease the level of fear so the cat doesn't feel like he has to run away (see question 12 above) and allow systematic desensitization and/ or habituation to occur or to investigate a home for that cat without any dogs.

**14) Q: Have you had any success in working with feral/semi-feral cats who are very fearful.**

A: See feral cat vs. fearful socialized cat comment at end.

**15) Q: Can you give an example of training for a feral cat to decrease its stress while it is staying in a shelter?**

A: See feral cat vs. fearful socialized cat comment at end.

**16) Q: Under which category does "flooding" apply, and is it an effective technique for desensitization?**

A: Flooding and systematic desensitization both fall under the category we discussed when we talked about habituation. They are not the same thing and there is a very fine line between the two of them. Flooding involves presenting the stimulus at a level that the animal is uncomfortable with and waiting for him to stop reacting and to calm to a relaxed state. Systematic desensitization involves presenting the stimulus just below the level that causes the animal to be uncomfortable and rewarding him for remaining relaxed. Over time you gradually increase the intensity as he remains relaxed. As you can imagine, if the trainer accidentally presents the stimulus at too high a level, one that creates fear, they have tipped over into flooding from systematic desensitization. Flooding should be avoided if possible because it creates a fear response during the session. One of the side effects we discussed was that if the animal is removed from the frightening situation before he truly becomes relaxed, you run the risk of actually sensitizing the animal (increasing his fear of the stimulus) rather than decreasing it. This effectively causes the technique attempt to backfire. Systematic desensitization is a much more humane technique and might actually take less time than flooding. See also Question 8, 16 and 17.

**17) Q: Would you consider burrito wrapping a cat or kitten in a towel as an example of flooding, in trying to help a cat get used to being held?**

A: Using towels to restrain cats is a safe and humane strategy when a cat must be restrained, if the handler is skilled in applying it. It should not be used as a behavior modification technique to try to force them to accept being held (flooding). Instead, systematic desensitization and counter conditioning can be used to teach the cat that towels are not frightening, so the next time the cat needs to be restrained, the towel itself does not cause a fear response, and the cat is even easier to wrap in the towel. See also Questions 8, 16 and 18.

**18) Q: How flooding was explained to me was to put a feral cat/kitten in a cage in the center of a busy room. Especially encourage loud sounds like a vacuum. Do you have any thoughts on this approach?**

A: What you describe is indeed flooding. This description is one that I would consider inhumane. The feral cat's level of fear of indoor environments, people and noises is so high that creating this situation puts the cat in a profound state of emotional distress. It would likely take a very long time for the cat to finally calm and enter a relaxed state (learned helplessness or shutting down is *absolutely not* the same thing as a relaxed state). And, again, keep in mind that if the stimulus is removed, e.g., turn off the vacuum, everyone leaves for the day, before the cat enters a state of relaxation, you are more likely to sensitize (increase fear) that cat, than to decrease it. See also Questions 8, 16, and 17.

**19) Q: What behaviors do you look for to know the cat is ready to move on to the next step?**

A: When determining if a cat is ready to move to the next step of a training plan, my criteria is for the cat to successfully offer your required behavior (criteria) 8 out of 10 times (repetitions) successfully or to show that he understands your cue to offer that

behavior (e.g., “touch” means to touch his nose to the chopstick). If you find your cat is struggling to go to the next step of your training plan, take a moment to think about the difference between the step where the cat was successful and what you are asking for now. Then think about how you might be able to break the distance between the two down into smaller steps.

### **Goal of this Webinar**

This webinar is intended to discuss behavior modification that can be applied to cats, including those in shelters, foster homes, or newly adoptive homes along with basic information on learning theory needed to understand how these techniques work and when to use them. There is simply not enough time to cover all aspects of the details of environment, stress reduction and enrichment, which are all also important components to a successful feline behavior program. Additional information on these areas can be found in other Maddie’s Institute resources such as: [http://www.maddiesfund.org/Maddies\\_Institute/Learning\\_Tracks/Enrichment\\_and\\_Stress\\_Reduction\\_for\\_Cats.html](http://www.maddiesfund.org/Maddies_Institute/Learning_Tracks/Enrichment_and_Stress_Reduction_for_Cats.html)

[http://www.maddiesfund.org/Maddies\\_Institute/Webcasts/Helping\\_Cats\\_Who\\_Hiss\\_and\\_Hide.html](http://www.maddiesfund.org/Maddies_Institute/Webcasts/Helping_Cats_Who_Hiss_and_Hide.html)

### **When to Train**

An additional point that should be emphasized is that the moment the cat is showing aggression is not the moment to try to implement a training plan or session. Several people requested video of training an aggressive cat. The goal is to teach the cat an alternate behavior so that when a situation arises where he might become aggressive, he can be asked to perform the alternate behavior and rewarded instead of resorting to aggression.

George, the cat in the videos, would be a cat that would likely become aggressive in a shelter due to frustration. These cats are often the most rewarding to train because they love this type of consistent interaction!

### **Feral Cats and Training**

There have been many questions regarding training feral cats to be less feral or fearful. We must remember that there is a big difference between a fearful socialized cat and a truly feral cat. The level of fear and panic that a feral cat exhibits during confinement and during interaction with people is exceptionally high. There is low likelihood that the fear can be reduced to a level where there is a non-frightening starting point for behavior modification in a shelter setting. The most humane option for truly feral cats is to minimize the length of their stay and minimize the amount of handling during those stays. Additional resources on fearful vs. feral can be found at:

[http://www.animalsheltering.org/resources/magazine/nov\\_dec\\_2009/shelter\\_medicine\\_scar\\_edy\\_cat\\_feral\\_cat.html](http://www.animalsheltering.org/resources/magazine/nov_dec_2009/shelter_medicine_scar_edy_cat_feral_cat.html)

<http://www.alleycat.org/StrayOrFeral>