

Training Kittens to Love Wearing a Harness and Leash

Overview of Behavior Modification Terms and Processes

We can train animals to love procedures and other things that they dislike or even hate by combining the process of counterconditioning with desensitization.

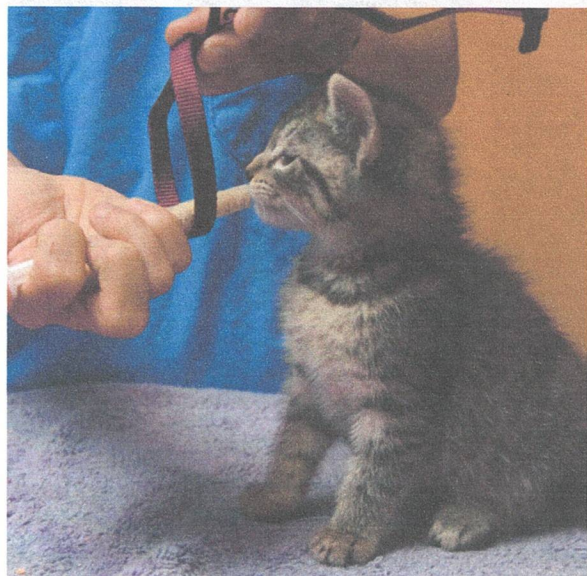
With classical counterconditioning we train the pet to associate the handling with things she likes such as food, treats, petting, or play so that she's in a positive emotional state rather than feeling fearful or angry. We generally combine counterconditioning with desensitization, meaning that we start by introducing the handling or aversive stimulus at a level that the pet barely notices and then gradually increase the level. The goal throughout the process is that the pet always acts as though she doesn't even notice the handling or stimulus that she previously disliked.

With operant counterconditioning, we train the pet to perform behaviors that are incompatible with the undesirable behavior. Ideally the pet earns rewards and enjoys performing the behavior so that she's simultaneously learning a positive association with the situation. For instance, we may reward a pet for remaining stationary and calm while you perform a given procedure or have her hold her nose to a target while she is handled.

Further description, examples and pictures of these terms and processes can be found in *the Low- Stress Handling, Restraint and Behavior Modification of Dogs & Cats* book and DVD set.

Part 1: Training your kitten to associate the harness with good things

Once a kitten's learned to accept and even enjoy being handled and held in different positions, training her to enjoy wearing a harness and leash is easy.



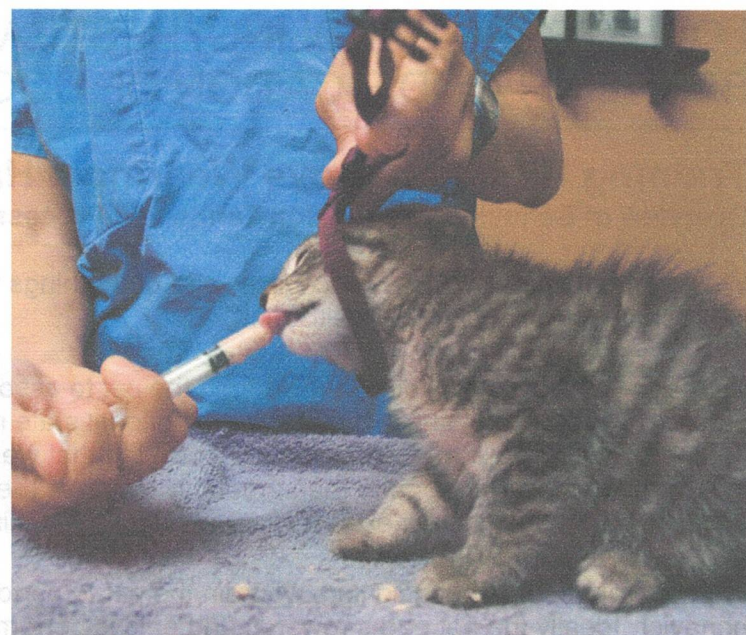
Step 1: First place food (canned cat food or tuna) in a syringe (with the tip cut off and without a needle) and place it through the harness so that your kitten is just near the harness.



Step 2: After several bites of food, remove both the food source and the harness simultaneously for at least 3 seconds. The goal is that your kitten begins to associate the harness with receiving food and the removal of the harness with the disappearance of food. When your kitten performs this step without hesitating to eat and can do so several times in a row, go to the next step.



Step 3: Hold the food source so that your kitten has to hold her nose up to the harness. After several bites of food, simultaneously remove both the food source and the harness for several seconds and then repeat the steps. When your kitten performs this step readily, several times in a row, progress to the next step.



Step 4: Repeat the previous step, but this time hold the food so that your kitten must insert her head through the harness. Be sure to hold the harness in one position rather than move it around.



Step 5: With sequential steps, your kitten should soon be able to push her head and neck all the way through the harness so that her chest is pressing against it but with no sensitivity to the pressure. For this to occur, you must hold the harness stationary rather than letting it move with your kitten.



Step 6: Next, put the harness on completely and continue distracting your kitten with food. Now engage your kitten in other activities such as sitting or targeting so that she does not focus on the harness and learns to associate it with positive experiences.

After just a few sessions, your kitten will love wearing his harness or leash.