

Training Cats and Kittens to Love Having Their Toenails Trimmed

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.

Cats and kittens can be trained to lie or sit on your lap for to toenail trim counterconditioning or they can rest on a couch or table. This handout demonstrates the counterconditioning with a kitten lying on its back in the handler's lap. To see how to get kittens or adult cats onto their back, refer to Box 1 on page 2 of this handout.

Step 1: First counter condition your kitten to having the feet handled. Lay your kitten on her back and put the food to her mouth. When she starts eating comfortably then touch the feet. Make sure you only handle the feet at a level where the kitten acts like she doesn't notice and only wants to eat the food. In fact, if she doesn't allow foot handling, start out with what she does allow (e.g. touching legs up higher, then systematically working your way closer to touching the feet within each step of the training). After several seconds, simultaneously stop feeding and stop touching the feet. This will teach your kitten to associate foot handling with food and that when the foot handling stops, the feeding also stops. Repeat this step several times and when you are sure that she only cares about the food, start handling the feet more vigorously. You can even increase the stimulus level by gently tapping the feet with the clippers while you have someone else deliver the food. Next, you can graduate to clipping one nail, then two nails, and then all five nails, while the kitten is eating treats. Always stay below the threshold where she reacts in any negative way to the procedure. For instance, if she pulls her foot away, it means that you are above her threshold and need to back up a step or two. The goal is that she acts like she only cares about eating the food and she doesn't seem to notice the handling. When she consistently holds still during the touching of her feet, graduate to operant counterconditioning.

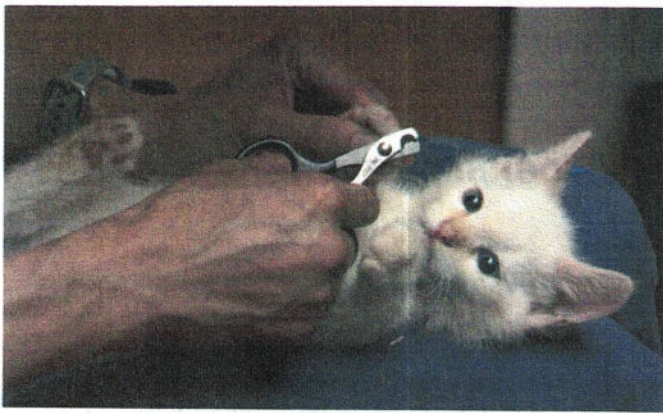


Operant Counterconditioning: Rewarding your kitten after she holds still for handling

If you are doing this entire procedure by yourself, it is best to skip to operant counterconditioning stage as it will allow you to have your hands free so that you can do the toenail trim yourself.

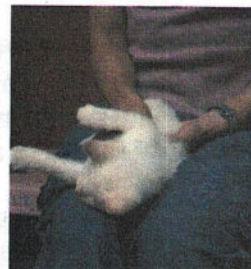


Step 2: Use operant counterconditioning by touching a paw for several seconds and then, if the kitten holds still, rewarding her with a treat. Always stop handling before the cat starts to struggle, but systematically increase the handling time to a period that's appropriate for a real nail trim.

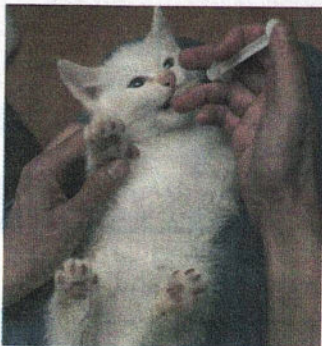


Step 3: Next, take the clippers out and trim a few nails. Stop and give treats before your kitten has a chance to react negatively. Most kittens are not yet afraid of the nail clippers, but adult cats may be so you'll need to add a few steps in between. For example, feed treats while you're simply holding the nail trimmers, then while you touch the trimmers to the nail, and then while trimming just one nail. Always find out what the cat will allow and start from that point. The goal is that your cat acts like she's just engrossed in or waiting for the food and doesn't even notice the handling.

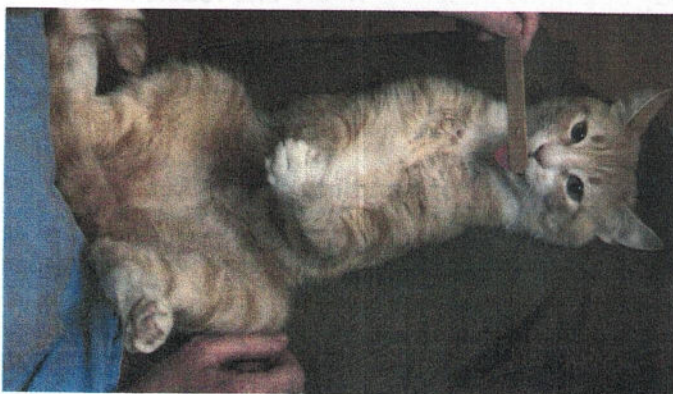
Placing a kitten or cat on their back in your lap



A good position for a one-person toenail trim is to have your kitten lie on her back in your lap. With one hand, grasp the chest and control the front legs. With the other, support the rear end. In one smooth movement, rotate your kitten onto her back in your lap. If you're supporting the kitten well, she should not be able to struggle.



When she's on her back, if your kitten is likely to struggle, give treats. This kitten is getting tuna out of a syringe that has had its tip removed. You can also use squeeze cheese or canned moist cat food in the syringe. Give a few bites, then remove the food syringe for several seconds. Make sure that you push the syringe or treat up to her face so that she does not have to reach and raise her head to get it. While your kitten is remaining still, give additional treats. Systematically increase the interval between treats. It might only take a minute for your kitten to learn to remain on her back.



For adult cats, place your cat on her back and immediately give treats. Gradually increase the interval between treats. If your cat tends to wiggle in between treats, stabilize her by holding her shoulder. Then, reward her for remaining still for several seconds and gradually build up the time. As an alternative to having them in your lap, you can also condition her when she is lying down on her side on a couch or in your lap, but remember to still follow the steps of handling the food and nails shown here.