

Animal Learning

By Michelle Posage, DVM



Animals repeat behaviors that work for them. That is to say, our pets will learn to behave in ways that satisfy their own needs and instincts. Unfortunately, these behaviors will not always meet our own expectations, and so it helps to understand a little about why they develop.

Behaviors that result in positive outcomes are more likely to be repeated. Behaviors that result in negative outcomes will decrease in frequency. B. F. Skinner, a well-known psychologist, called this operant conditioning.

Our parents and teachers are usually the first to introduce the concept of positive reinforcement. For example, if we studied for a test and performed well, our teacher gave us a good grade. Our parents may then give us praise and ice cream. The behavior (studying) resulted in a positive outcome (good grade, ice cream), and so the behavior is more likely to be repeated.

How does this apply to your pet? Well, let's say you have a cat that gets hungry at five o'clock in the morning. She is frustrated because there is nothing in her food bowl, so she starts to cry...loudly. Let's also suppose this happens to be a Saturday, and you would like to sleep late. So, after yelling "quiet" a few times, you get up to feed her before losing anymore sleep. The same thing happens the next day. By Monday or Tuesday you have successfully trained your cat to wake you up at 5 a.m., or did your cat train you? Why did this happen? The behavior (loud crying) was positively reinforced (food) repeatedly, and therefore, likely to be repeated.

To avoid this sort of thing with your own pet, be aware of some basic principles of behavior conditioning:

- Punishment can be the removal of something pleasant. A dog jumping up for attention will stop jumping once attention is consistently removed.
- Rewards should occur during or immediately following a behavior that you are trying to encourage. The same is true when you are punishing a behavior that you are trying to change.
- Reinforcement works best when it is repeated predictably.
- Punishments that frighten or hurt are ineffective and unnecessary.

So how do you solve the problem of the feline wake-up call? The first approach many pet owners take is to associate the behavior with an unpleasant outcome, like a squirt of water from a spray bottle. However, this tactic often fails due to a lack of consistency or a cat smart enough to meow out of shooting range.

A better approach is to remove the reward for the crying. You will have to be strong enough to listen to a few mornings of loud, persistent crying. But, the crying will eventually stop when it is clear that it does not work. Then you can feed her at your preferred time while she is performing your preferred behavior such as being quiet. Your reward, of course, is to sleep in on the weekends.

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Dr. Michelle Posage is a veterinary behaviorist at the Animal Medical Center of New England, a specialty and emergency animal hospital. For more information or to schedule a personal consultation with Dr. Posage call 603.821.7222 or go to www.amcne.com.