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Issued 2:11pm JANUARY 7, 2010 Expires 10:00am JANUARY 8, 2010

1 of 2

Cats are trainable — and that's not a punchline

LINDA LOMBARDI For The Associated Press

Posted November 21, 2009 at 7:37 p.m.

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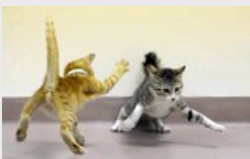
This photo taken Nov. 7, 2009 shows a kitten exploring a cat tunnel during a kitten kindergarten class at the Houston SPCA in Houston. (AP Photo/Pat Sullivan)

People have low expectations of cats.

Sam Connelly tells of the time that she and her cat Storm observed a Canine Good Citizen test while they were waiting for their feline agility class to start.

"I'm watching the dogs and I commented to the evaluator, 'My cat can do all that,'" said Connelly. "At the end she said, 'Want to take a shot?' like it was a big joke."

To the evaluator's surprise, Storm passed the test, successfully performing commands like sit, stay, come, down, and walking on a leash.



Kittens learn to socialize and play with other cats during a kitten kindergarten class at the Houston SPCA.

Storm is a cat who does some of these things for a living. He helps Connelly train lost pet search dogs in Maryland by hiding and waiting to be found.

But training cats isn't just for professionals — human or feline. The Michigan Humane Society has a Pawsitive Start program that uses volunteers to train cats in their shelter in useful and fun behaviors like the high-five and walking into a carrier.



This photo taken Nov. 7, 2009 shows kittens learning to socialize and play with other cats during a kitten kindergarten class at the Houston SPCA in Houston. (AP Photo/Pat Sullivan)

"A lot of people look kind of funny at us when we say we train the shelter cats," says CJ Bentley of the humane society. Cats need more than just playtime outside the cage to be well-adjusted in the shelter environment, she says.

People expect pet cats to "just hang out, which isn't realistic," says Melissa Chan, behavior specialist at the Houston SPCA. Cats are naturally active animals, she says, and "one thing I wish I could tell every cat owner:

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This photo taken Nov. 7, 2009 shows animal behaviorist Dulce Garcia showing how to get kittens interested in using a scratching post during a kitten kindergarten class at the Houston SPCA in Houston. (AP Photo/Pat Sullivan)

Cats want to work for their food.”

Having your cat touch your hand with its nose on command is one of the easiest behaviors to train, Chan says. If you hold out your hand, most cats will naturally sniff it. Reward with a treat until the cat is doing it every time you present your hand. Then, start repeating a word like “touch” every time.

This trick can then be used to get the cat to move where you want it by placing your hand in the desired spot.

Another useful behavior is entering the cat carrier on their own. Sandy Lagreca, a volunteer at the Michigan Humane Society, says that this is great for both cats and people: “They go in without having to be picked up and shoved into the crate, which can be traumatic for the owner.”

All this requires is patience, repetition and a highly desired treat. Throw the treat into the crate. Let the cat go in, eat the treat, and leave, repeating until it’s completely comfortable. Then, start to close the door and leave the cat inside for increasingly longer intervals. Repeat until the cat is comfortable before you try to pick up the carrier.

Chan says that people often don’t think cats are trainable because they lack a dog’s desire to please, “but we have things that cats want. That’s all that matters.”

Connelly says to keep training sessions short — she recommends no more than five minutes — and varied.

“Teach something else when they get one thing right,” she says. “Cats get bored easily.”

In addition to the specific useful behaviors, Bentley says, training can help prevent problems by changing the terms of your relationship with your pet.

“Teaching our cats to successfully do what we like and get rewarded makes them more inclined to do what we like.”



This photo taken Nov. 7, 2009 shows two kittens learning to use a scratching post instead of furniture during a kitten kindergarten class at the Houston SPCA in Houston. (AP Photo/Pat Sullivan)



This photo released by the Michigan Humane Society shows Brody, a 4 month old domestic medium-hair cat, giving a “high-five” to his personal trainer as part of the Pawsitive Start program at the Michigan Humane Society. (AP Photo/Michigan Humane Society, Dan Lippitt) ****NO SALES****

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Currently **24°**
Mostly Cloudy
Wind: N 12mph

Today **28°**
11°

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Abilene/Taylor Law Enforcement Center
- Organization seminar - 01/07** 6:30 p.m.
Abilene Public Library, Main Branch
- Square dance workshop - 01/07** 6:30 p.m.
Wagon Wheel
- Talent show - 1/7** 7:30 p.m.
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