

# Training Cats and Kittens to Love Having Their Toenails Trimmed\*

By Dr. Sophia Yin

## OVERVIEW

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 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 a behavior that's incompatible with the undesirable behavior. Ideally the pet earns a reward so that she's simultaneously learning a positive association with the situation. For instance, we may reward a pet to remain stationary and calm while you perform a given procedure.

### Cats can be trained to lie or sit on your lap for the counterconditioning or they can rest on a couch or table.

In this handout we will demonstrate the counterconditioning with the kitten lying on its back in the handler's lap. To see how to get kittens onto their back, refer to page 2 of this handout. For adult cats, have them sit in your lap or practice when they are lying down on their side.

### Part 1: Classical Counterconditioning.



**Fig.A, Step 1: First countercondition to having the feet handled.**

Lay the kitten on her back and touch the feet while feeding for several seconds. Then stop feeding and stop touching the feet simultaneously so that the kitten learns to associate foot handling with food. When she consistently holds still during the touching of her feet, graduate to operant counterconditioning.

Next, you can go to handling the feet for an instant before pairing it with treats or you can go directly to step 2.

\*To see video depicting this protocol go to [www.AskDrYin.com](http://www.AskDrYin.com).

**This page is excerpted from, *Low Stress Handling, Restraint and Behavior Modification of Dogs and Cats*, by Dr. Sophia Yin. ([www.nerdbook.com](http://www.nerdbook.com))**

For more information about animal behavior, go to [www.AskDrYin.com](http://www.AskDrYin.com), where you can view free and subscription-based videos that provide step-by-step behavior modification instructions.

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## Part 2: Operant Counterconditioning: Rewarding the cat after she holds still for handling.

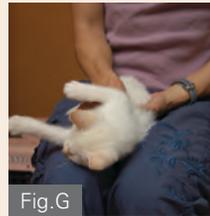


**Fig.B, C, Step 2:** Use operant counterconditioning by touching a paw for several seconds and then, if the kitten holds still, rewarding her with a treat. Always stop handling before the cat starts to struggle, but systematically increase the handling time to a period that's appropriate for a real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



**Fig.D, Step 3:** Next, take the clippers out and trim a few nails. Stop and give treats before the kitten has a chance to react adversely. Most kittens are not yet afraid of the nail clippers, but if they are you'll need to add a few steps. 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. (Watch the videos on cat and canine toenail trims at [www.AskDrYin.com](http://www.AskDrYin.com))

### Box 1: Placing kittens on their backs in your lap\*



**Fig.E to H:** A good position for a one-person toenail trim is to have the 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 the cat onto her back in your lap. If you're supporting the kitten well, she should not be able to struggle.



**Fig.I, J:** When she's on her back, if the kitten is likely to struggle, give treats. This kitten is getting tuna out of a syringe that has had its tip removed. Give a few bites, then remove the food syringe for several seconds. While the kitten is remaining still, give additional treats. Systematically increase the interval between treats. It might only take a minute for the kitten to learn to remain on her back.

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