

Training Kittens to Love Wearing a Harness and Leash

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.

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.



Fig.A, Step 1: First place food (canned cat food or tuna) in a syringe (without the needle) and place it through the harness so that the kitten is just near the harness.



Fig.B, Step 2: After several bites of food, remove both the food source and the harness simultaneously so that the kitten begins to associate the harness with receiving food. When the kitten performs this step with no adverse reaction several times in row, go to the next step.

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

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

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Fig.C

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



Fig.D

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



Fig.E

Fig.E, Step 5: With sequential steps, the 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 the kitten.



Fig.F

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

Realistically, kittens who already accept handling well can often skip many of the steps suggested for counterconditioning to the harness.

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