



How to train your cat to walk on a leash and harness

If you think your cat might benefit from some time outdoors, one great option could be teaching your cat to walk on a leash and harness. Your home is the safest place for your cat, by not letting your cat roam freely you are keeping them safe from car accidents, dog attacks and injuries from cat fights, as well as keeping native wildlife safe and the neighbours happy. However, your cat can still enjoy some fresh air, stimulation and a stroll if they are trained to walk on a leash and harness. Experts agree that cats can be trained to do many things such as sitting, staying, high fiving and walking on a leash. It just requires a bit of patience.

General tips for training your cat

The most common method used to train a cat is called clicker training. The 'clicker' is a sound marker your cat hears immediately after successfully completing the desired behaviour. The clicker sound, followed by a reward, means they got it right! The clicker helps your cat to quickly identify the precise behaviour that results in a treat. It is an excellent method that, once grasped, is useful to train your cat to walk on a leash and harness.

Clickers can be bought in most pet stores. A clicker is a simple plastic box with a metal tongue. When pressed it makes a 'click' sound. Some cats are scared by a loud clicker, so if using one, make sure you use a quiet clicker. However, if you don't have a clicker you can make a clicking sound with your tongue, click a pen, or you can say "Yes!" in an excited, encouraging tone.

To start the training:

- 1) Find out what treats your cat prefers and will be the most motivating for your cat (chicken, etc. – in tiny bits).
- 2) Decide on a sound marker (i.e. a clicker sound or word).
- 3) Teach your cat to associate the clicker sound with a treat, this is called 'charging' the clicker. Every time the click sounds, a treat is offered immediately.
- 4) Link the behaviour you want with the clicker and the treat. Ideally, there should be only one second between the behaviour and the clicker sound and the treat, so your cat learns the association between the behaviour, the clicker and the reward.
- 5) Take small steps... don't expect too much too soon.
- 6) Keep training sessions short (2-3 minutes). Try to always end on a positive note, so your cat is happy to play along with the training. You can have 2-3 training sessions a day.
- 7) Once a behaviour is learnt, and on cue, the clicker and the treats can be gradually faded out.

Leash training your cat

Walking a cat is very different to walking a dog. It is about enrichment for your cat, not about aerobic exercise.

The best time to introduce your cat to a harness is when they are a kitten. Older cats, however, can also learn to walk on a leash if you are patient and make leash training a positive experience.

Keep in mind that walking on a leash and venturing outdoors isn't for every cat. Some cats may never be comfortable on a leash or outdoors due to age, health or personality.

You should never force your cat outside their comfort zone. However, cats that show a keen interest in the outdoors are great candidates for walking on a leash and harness!

This is a sample leash and harness training plan you can try with your cat:

1) Choose a harness and leash that are the right size for your cat. Avoid retractable leashes that may injure your cat.

2) Find a quiet area of your home for training.

3) Expose your cat to the harness and leash inside the home and away from anything unfamiliar or scary.

- Place the harness near your cat, click, treat. Repeat over time so that your cat develops a positive association with the harness.
- Briefly and gently, place the harness on your cat's back, click, treat, then remove the harness. Clip and unclip the buckles or Velcro of the harness near your cat, so they become familiar with the sounds.
- Once your cat is comfortable with the harness, clip one of the harness clips shut, click and treat, then take the harness off.
- Next, clip two of the harness clips, click, treat, then remove the harness.
- Once your cat is calm while you put the harness on, you can leave it on for longer periods. Pet your cat, play and feed them while they wear the harness. To get to this step could take days or weeks depending on your cat. If over time your cat doesn't adjust to the harness, that's ok, you can have indoor adventures instead.
- Once your cat is comfortable in the harness around the house, attach the leash to the harness, click, treat, un-attach. Gradually repeat.
- Watch your cat closely – their body language will show if they are distracted or scared. If your cat stares very intently away from you, they may be distracted. If the training isn't moving smoothly, your cat may be stressed. If the hair on your cat's tail and back become extra puffy, they may be scared. If any of these are the case, take a break.

4) Once your cat is comfortable with the harness and leash, hold the leash in your hand and stand still, when your cat looks at you, click and treat. When your cat walks towards you, click and provide a treat. You can then practice taking a step forward. Quickly click and treat if your cat walks with you. Gradually increase this to take more steps with your cat, while clicking and rewarding them.

5) Once you have both had some practice with this around the house, you can teach your cat to heel and walk with you, or you can let your cat lead the walk.

Cats are sensitive to the feeling of the harness touching their sides. Avoid pulling the leash too sharply as this will cause the harness to create a sudden pressure on your cat's body, and this may make them feel scared.

6) Train a safety 'recall'.

- Call your cat's name before you feed them. Click and give them food when they come to you.
- Call their name from different rooms of your house, click and give them treats when they come to you. Once they are consistently coming when called, increase the distance.

7) You can now practice walking outside.

- Select a quiet, safe and low-distraction outdoor area.
- Choose a designated place indoors where your cat can wait for their harness to be put on, click and treat. It is best to associate the harness and walking with waiting in a particular place indoors rather than with the front door, as this may encourage 'door dashing'.
- Pick up your harnessed cat and carry them through the door to a safe place to practice, such as the garden. Don't let your cat walk out of the door on a leash or they may get used to doing so when they're not leashed.
- Once your cat is outside, click and treat if they look at you or move toward you.
- Take a very short walk with them – just one or two steps at first, click and treat every time they look at you or walk with you, then go inside.
- Practice many short walks with treat rewards and slowly build this into longer walks.
- Practice recall with your cat so that you will be able to call them away from undesirable places.
- Train at your cat's pace. Training should stay interesting and challenging for them but not make them feel stressed or frightened.



A final word

Routine

Remember that your walks should form part of your cat's routine. You don't want your cat dashing to the door every time you use the door, so when it's time to go for a walk, have a phrase you use every time and jingle the leash. Cats thrive on routine, so if you can take them for a walk around the same time each day, this will be beneficial for your cat.

Feeding

As you will be using food treats for training purposes, feed less at mealtimes, so they aren't overfed. You might consider not feeding your cat out of a bowl but instead using food as a means of training and mental enrichment.

Where to go

Leash and harness training can be a great activity for cats that show a curiosity in the outdoors. Consider where you will be able to safely walk your cat, and let your cat guide you by what they are interested in.



Be prepared for a slower and more thoughtful experience than walking a dog.



For more info visit: www.tassiecat.com

Thanks to Dr Katrina Ward for the great information on training your cat to walk on a leash and harness.

