

Cat 101

How to train your feline to walk on a leash.

Have you ever tried training your cat to walk on a leash? Most likely, you started by slipping a harness on your cat. What happened next?

"He just started rolling around all over the floor...he hated it!"

Before you can train your cat to have outdoor adventures as depicted here (by Santa Barbara Humane Society's own Matt Chan and his cat, Mercedes), first you need to desensitize your cat to the harness.

What's desensitization? It's a process that reduces a particular response to a particular stimulus, through repeated exposure. In this case, it's reducing an aversion to wearing a harness.

What you'll need

- 1 Harness**
a small dog harness will work, try the Easy Walk:
<https://www.petsafe.net/easywalk>
- 2 Clicker**
Karen Pryor Academy produces easy-to-use clickers:
<https://karen-pryor-clicker-training.myshopify.com/collections/clickers>
- 3 Treats**
Can be cat treats, or small bits of chicken—whatever your cat will most enjoy.



Day One

You're going to be doing a lot something called "Click-Treat", and it's exactly what it sounds like. The *click* is a promise that something of value is coming—food. The sound of the click marks a behavior. Every time your cat does something you like, you'll click, then give a small treat (this works best for cats before they've had a meal). They will associate what they did (which was marked by the clicking sound) with what they want (the tasty treats you have).

So first, we need the harness to not be a scary thing. Set your new harness on the floor. When your cat begins walking toward it, click,

then immediately treat. When she sniffs the harness, click-treat. Now your cat is on the path to be able to go enjoy the outdoors safely with you!

Put the harness away. Later, bring it back out. Click-treat when she walks towards it. Click-treat for sniffing it, for rubbing against it. Now leave the harness laying around with the rest of your cat's own things, such as toys, blankets, bowls—let it become part of the normal scenery.

Day Two

Repeat the above steps. Use patience—it's not a fast process, usually. This time, gently slip the harness over your cat (they'll likely squirm), then immediately remove it. Click-treat.

Repeat this again later in the day. Just a quick exposure to wearing the harness; click-treat.

Day Three

See if your cat can wear the harness for a few seconds without being bothered. Click-treat, then remove. Click-treat again. You're clicking for them being able to wear the harness, and clicking for them being able to have it removed.

Gradually build up the time your cat can comfortably wear the harness. Don't jump from 1 second to 1 minute. All of your patience will pay off in the end.

Day Four and Beyond

Once your cat can comfortably wear the harness without discomfort or annoyance, leave it on her for extended periods. Up to 30 minutes at a time is plenty. Simply wearing the harness is a behavior to reward, so click-treat while she is wearing it, simply for wearing it. Now you have successfully desensitized your cat to wearing a harness!

(Note: never click unless it's followed by a treat; otherwise, the click will lose its meaning. Not treating after a single click will break the promise.)



Begin Walking

Now that your cat can wear a harness, you can start training the behavior of walking on a leash.

Snap on a leash, and take a single step forward. When your cat takes a single step—even if it is the most minute forward motion—click-treat. Provide lavish praise! Cats like to feel proud of their accomplishments too.

This is also how we train Loose Leash Walking in dogs. It doesn't start with a 10-minute walk; it starts with a single step. This is how we get into sync with each other. We can't take that long walk with a dog, or that walk at the beach with a cat, until you are truly in sync with each other.

Take another step with your cat, and when she steps forward again, click-treat. By this point, that may be all the steps she will take. Unsnap the leash, and give your cat a break.

After the break, try it again. Remember, even one step is huge accomplishment. And that accomplishment needs to be marked (with the clicker) and treated.

When your cat is consistently taking one step after you have taken a step or with you, you can graduate to two steps at a time. Later, three steps, then click-treat. Take side steps, click-treat. Take a backward step, click-treat.

Gradually, build up the number of steps you can take with your cat, and keep click-treating. As you do this, you are becoming more in sync with each other.

Eventually, your cat will build enough confidence and comfort with the harness and leash that you won't need to click-treat as often. If you find that your cat backslides, "go back to kindergarten". Start back at one step, click-treat. Then slowly build back up.

Cats, dogs, and people all have different walking paces. Dogs are constantly slowing down to walk at our relatively much-slower walking speed. Cats, on the other hand, walk slower than people. Walking a cat is not exactly the same activity as walking a dog.

But if you have the patience—and the right timing, and the right rewards your cat will want to work for—you'll eventually have a cat who can do more things in life outside of the four walls of your home. With consistent training, your cat may be able to go see and do things that they had never even imagined existed—such as walking in the sand, at the beach.