



Dr. Kim's feline mews



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kitty **BLACKMAIL**

Cats find humans very trainable. They have perfect timing, persistence and consistency. We certainly need to take a leaf out of their book and look at the successful strategies our feline friends adopt to get exactly what they want from us! Forewarned is forearmed – many cats are making their owners miserable by their tyranny. At the Cat Clinic, we rather admire the feline ingenuity, but now we are going to give the game away, so humans can attempt to get the upper hand again.

Here's how it works. If you want to get any other being (human or animal) to repeat a particular behaviour, you will have to give them an indication that you have noticed the activity, and then either increase the chances of them doing it again by rewarding them, or decrease the chances of a repeat performance by punishing them. Words do not need to come into it. Food and claws will do.

So, your cat notices that when you go to the fridge or cat food cupboard, sometimes food appears in their bowl. Excellent.

Then your cat has a go at drawing your attention to the fridge or the cat food cupboard. First they walk around, but then they make a noise. They watch to see what gets you out of your chair – a yowl is what it takes. And then, silly you, you give them food to keep them quiet. Oh no! You have just rewarded the yowling, not the silence! Your cat can keep you hopping up and down all night with this method. They can also wake you up whenever they feel like it.

Once your cat has trained you, ignoring the yowl is really hard. Because now your cat thinks you have lost your mind and forgotten your training! For every time that you answer the yowl (by responding, or worse still by filling the food dish), you have to ignore the yowl 10 times at least, in order to try to get the cat to understand that the yowling technique will not work any more. Fortunately,

you can speed-up this process by diverting the cat to another activity. So now when they yowl, they get a game (often, especially with young cats, all they want is your

attention anyway and the game is the best fun). Most cats are not marathon players, and after a quick bat or two at a rope, they'll go back to bed without any extra food. At the Cat Clinic, we talk to many, many distraught owners who are being driven mad by their cat's training success. Just remember: how do they get tigers to jump through hoops of fire? By giving them food when they get to the other side!

Now think of the things your cat will not let you do. Clip claws, give pills, comb them. How did they train you to stop doing those things? A growl, a hiss, a hook with a claw. They have punished you for doing something they did not like, and did not want you

do again. The problem is, no one has managed to train a cat through punishment – they just get fiercer. You have to give them something they want – like a delicious food treat – in exchange for their permission to take a bit of liberty with their personal space. You have to be careful with the timing here – otherwise you will be giving them the treat for behaving badly! If you do then you can kiss your chances of a successful nail clip or comb out goodbye!

So next time you plan to jump to your kitty's command, just remember, it is you who has just been trained by an expert!



Dogs have masters, cats have staff!