

Squirt Bottles for Training Cats?

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger, CCBC, discusses aversives versus positive reinforcement methods of training.

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Q: Everyone has their own methods of training and behavior modification for their cats, and their reasons for them. I would like your opinion of the use of squirt bottles, squirt guns, and also the use of those with vinegar as an additive in the water.

A: I don't recommend training cats by squirting them with water or other substances. More effective, humane and long-term training solutions include the use of positive reinforcement methods, such as clicker training, and refocusing the cats on other alternative and acceptable behaviors.

Using squirt bottles and other aversives can have detrimental effects. These include breaking the bonds between the cat and her people, developing other fear-based behaviors and escalation of the original unappreciated behavior. Cats commonly associate the use of aversives such as squirt bottles with the person who is aiming the water-weapon. This can result in a cat who is stressed, insecure and afraid of the people who she should be the most bonded to.

Squirt bottles are not part of my training tool kit. Squirt bottles and squirt guns are short-term solutions that don't train cats or modify behaviors on a permanent basis. On a rare occasion, they might be useful for averting a potentially life-threatening situation in the moment. For instance, squirting a cat when she's jumping up on a hot stove can prevent a potential disaster. Usually, it will stop the cat in the instance, but it won't permanently change the behavior. Most likely, the cat will be back up on the stove checking things out a couple of hours later or the next day. If on that rare occasion you do find yourself using a squirt bottle to stop a potential disaster, don't squirt the cat in the face or head and never put vinegar in the water. Vinegar stings, smells awful and can add to the cat's stress.

Instead of using squirt bottles, consider long-term solutions using clicker training, management, refocusing the cat on acceptable activities and other positive methods to permanently change the behavior. Depending on the behavior that is being modified and its causes, the solutions vary. The cat behavior columns that I have written for CatChannel address a variety of cat behavior challenges along with their positive reinforcement based recommendations that are specific for each challenge.

Keep in mind that these positive techniques are not instant magic bullets. They do take a little work and time but are well worth the effort.