



Feline Consent Checks

“Choice is a primary reinforcer.” What does this mean? Primary reinforcers indicate things an animal automatically desires, that they don’t have to learn that they need, such as food and water. Studies in the field of behavioral science show that having an element of **control over their environment is as rewarding for cats as their favorite food and treats**. The concept of consent is a cornerstone of positive reinforcement-based behavior science and can be applied with great results to daily interactions with your cat.

So how can you help your cat exercise choice?

Our favorite way is to implement Consent Checks. This technique is a staple for our Behavior & Training team and is our go-to not only for unfamiliar cats, but our cats at home as well. This simple tool will allow your cat to better communicate with you and give you greater insight into what is truly enjoyable for them.

1. Pick an interaction with your cat. An easy one is petting gently on the cheek or chin, or otherwise interacting with touch.
2. Engage in the interaction for 3-5 seconds, **then stop and retract your hands for 5 seconds**. What does your cat do?
3. **If your cat reengages**, continue the interaction!
4. **If your cat disengages**, respect their choice and *don't reengage*. Instead, try a different activity, like offering a treat or a toy.

Signs of Reengaging

Moving towards you
Reinitiating touch
Nudging or licking
Rubbing body against you
Leaning into touch
Gently pawing you

Signs of Disengaging

Staring at your hand
Not moving towards you
Moving away
Looking away
Tail twitching
Leaning away during touch

Why is this simple exercise SO important? It allows cats to assert a measure of control over their environment. *THEY get to choose when they want to be touched or not.* Counterintuitively (especially with more shy or reserved cats), this offer of choice **often makes them more likely to come and solicit interactions from you!** Think of a personal relationship; are you more likely to feel trusting and comfortable with a person who forces interactions with you and ignores how you feel about it, or someone who can tell when you need to be left alone and respects your space?

Fun fact: Want a strange cat to like you? Ignore them! Multiple studies have shown that cats are more likely to initiate contact (and with longer interactions!) when humans sit back and allow the cats to choose how and when to approach. This is the secret to why cats tend to gravitate towards people with allergies—they are usually the only ones in the room NOT trying to pet the cat!