

Appendix 12

Training Your Cat to Like the Cat Carrier

If your cat only associates the cat carrier with unpleasant car journeys that end up at the vets or cattery, it is not surprising if he becomes reluctant to go into the carrier. Using force to get him into the carrier can make matters even worse, often to the point where the cat becomes so fearful that he is likely to run away as soon as he sees the carrier. Therefore, it is better to teach him to accept the cat carrier by changing his perception of it, from being a dreaded device associated with being taken to frightening places, to being somewhere that is safe, comfortable, and secure.

If your cat already has a strong negative association with your current carrier it is probably best to purchase a new one with the following features:

- It should be made of a solid and easily cleaned material such as plastic and be large enough to accommodate your cat comfortably. It should have a front or side opening, and it is useful if it can also be opened from the top. Most importantly it should be possible to completely remove the top half of the carrier. (Fig A12.1)
- Ensure that the front or side opening door can be removed and replaced easily without needing to take the carrier apart. Also make sure that it is not hinged towards the centre which can partly block the opening.
- The clips separating the two halves should be sturdy and remain attached to the carrier. Small insubstantial clips can easily break, and clips that need to be removed can easily get lost.

Teaching your cat to accept the cat carrier

- If the carrier has been used before, even if it was a long time ago, wash and dry it well to remove any residual scent that might bring back bad memories for your cat.
- Remove the top half of the carrier and place some soft comfortable bedding in the bottom half (cats often prefer soft fleecy material, it can also help if it already contains the cat's own scent and/or your scent).
- Position the lower half of the carrier in a place that the cat already regards as safe, warm, and comfortable.
- Spraying synthetic facial pheromone into the carrier a few minutes before it is introduced to the cat may help the cat to perceive it as a safe place, and a few favourite treats may also help to encourage him towards it.
- Leave it in place so that the cat becomes accustomed to it and has the option to use it as a comfortable and secure bed.



Fig. A12.1. The best type of carrier to choose is one that can be separated into two halves and has a front or side opening.

- It may take a few days or a few weeks for your cat to become fully relaxed and accustomed to the presence of bottom half of the carrier. Ideally, he should be using it regularly as a place to rest and relax. But if, after a few weeks he is still unwilling to go near the carrier: 1.) Ensure that it is situated somewhere safe and attractive for your cat. 2.) Try encouragements as described below.
- Once your cat is fully relaxed with the bottom half of the carrier, the top half can be replaced, but not the door.
- Even if previously accustomed to the bottom half, most cats are likely to be suspicious of the carrier once the top half has been attached, but given time some will be happy to go inside and may even continue to use it as a bed. For others, extra encouragement may be required, especially if the cat has had previous bad experiences with a cat carrier.

Encourage with food treats

Some cats can be encouraged into the carrier easily by throwing a few favourite treats inside the carrier or by poking a stick treat through the slats at the side or back of the carrier. Others however will need slow and gentle encouragement, as follows:

- Place a favourite food treat at a distance from the carrier where your cat feels relaxed. If he is reluctant or hesitant to take the treat move it further away from the carrier to where he will take the treat without any fear or hesitancy.
- Gradually place the treats closer to the carrier, but if the cat shows any fear or hesitation move the treat back to where it was previously. Take things slowly until the cat will happily go inside the carrier to take the treats.
- Using food treats frequently is recommended during training, but once training is complete treats should still be given, but intermittently rather than all the time as

this will help to maintain the learned behaviour. Also, there will be times when it is not possible to give your cat a treat.

Encourage with comfortable and safe bedding

This teaches the cat to regard the bedding within the carrier as safe and relaxing.

- Use a mat or 'flat' cat bed that will fit comfortably within the carrier. Ideally use something that your cat already chooses to sleep on.
- Initially place the bedding well away from the carrier and lure the cat towards the bedding by dropping food treats on to it.
- But the aim is not just to teach the cat to go to the bedding, we also need to teach him to settle and relax there.
- If the cat immediately lies down and relaxes on the bedding, this is ideal, and the cat should be rewarded with extra food treats. If he does not lie down and relax we may need to teach him to do so gradually.
- To start with the cat can be given additional treats just for standing on the bedding. But then treats should only be given for sitting and once he is sitting more often than standing, treats should then only be given for lying down.
- We also want to reward him for signs of relaxation such as washing and/or lying on his side. You may be able to help him relax by talking to him softly and stroking him, especially under his chin and on the sides of his face by the corner of his mouth.
- Once your cat is frequently lying down and relaxing on the bedding start to move it gradually closer to the carrier. *But never move the bedding while the cat is on it!*
- At each stage that you move the bedding closer to the carrier, lure the cat there with treats and encourage him to relax.
- Eventually the bedding can be put inside the carrier, but this also needs to be done gradually. Start by placing it just on the edge of the opening and then very slowly and gradually move it inside.

Encourage with toys

For some cats play may be the best way to reduce fear and to encourage them to go close to and enter the cat carrier.

- Use a favourite wand toy to play a game near to the carrier. As with food treats if your cat does not want to play, increase the distance from the carrier to where he is happy to play, and then slowly and gradually decrease the distance.
- If your cat is happy to play very close to the carrier it may then be possible to encourage him into the carrier by poking a suitable toy e.g. a feather through the slats in the carrier, or by dragging a string toy through the carrier via the slats at the back or side.
- The only problem with using play is that this increases general arousal and we really want the cat to be relaxed in and around the carrier. Therefore, once the cat's fear of the carrier has been reduced using toys, it is advisable to then use food treats and 'safe' bedding to encourage relaxation.

Shutting the door of the carrier

Once the cat is happy to go into the carrier without the door being attached it is then necessary to teach him to become accustomed to being shut in the carrier:

- Refit the door but leave it open and encourage the cat into the carrier as before.
- Keep the door open for a while (at least a few days for a nervous cat) to allow him to become accustomed to it before attempting to shut him in the carrier.
- Encourage him into the carrier using a treat and shut the door for no more than a second or two. Praise him, open the door, and give him another treat inside the carrier.
- Very gradually increase the time that the door is closed before opening it and giving him a treat.
- Treats can also be given to the cat while he is shut in the carrier by posting them through the closed door.
- If he shows any signs of distress or panic let him out straight away.

Travelling

Before taking your cat on a journey he needs to become accustomed to being moved from one place to another in the carrier:

- With the cat in the carrier move it slightly e.g. slide it a little way along the ground or lift it slowly and steadily up off the ground. Replace the carrier onto a firm surface then post a treat into the carrier for the cat.
- When you pick up the carrier with your cat inside hold it securely by the handle and underneath, rather than holding it by the top handle alone as any swinging motion can be uncomfortable for the cat.
- Start to get your cat accustomed to being transported in the carrier by carrying the cat around the house and garden, starting with very short distances i.e. just a few steps and then from one room to another. When you stop reward your cat by posting treats into the carrier. Also give him a treat when you let him out.
- The next stage is to place the carrier in the car and feed a few treats through the holes in the carrier. Do this first without the engine running, and then with the engine running.
- Secure the carrier well so that it does not move around during a journey. If there is enough room place the carrier on the floor rather than on a seat.
- Then take your cat for a few short journeys ‘around the block’ and back home again. Each time when you return home give your cat a special tasty meal or engage him in a favourite game.
- Covering the carrier with a lightweight towel or small sheet can block the cat’s view of potentially frightening things, both during the journey and on arrival. But occasionally lift the cover to check that the cat is OK, and do not use anything that is too thick or too heavy that might restrict the air in the carrier.
- Drive steadily, trying as best you can to avoid bumps in the road or sudden braking or acceleration.

- If the cat is accustomed to music or the radio being played at home, playing the same music or radio stations in the car may help to block out unfamiliar and frightening sounds for the cat.
- Never leave the cat unattended in the car, especially on a warm day.
- Never carry more than one cat at a time in a carrier.

This appendix was compiled with help from International Cat Care and I recommend that you watch the following videos:

Encouraging your cat to be happy in a cat carrier

Getting your cat used to travel

Putting your cat in a cat carrier

These videos can be accessed via the following link: <https://icatcare.org/advice/cat-handling-videos> or via the iCatCare YouTube page: <https://m.youtube.com/user/iCatCare>

Further Reading

Bradshaw J. and Ellis S. (2016) *The Trainable Cat. How to Make Life Happier for You and Your Cat*. Allen Lane, London.

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