



Cat Carrier Desensitization

Oftentimes, when a cat sees the carrier come out of the closet, they start looking for the nearest bed to hide under. Typically, the carrier is a harbinger of bad times to come: a trip to the vet, boarding facility, groomer, a long car ride to a new home, etc. It only takes a couple back-to-back negative experiences for your cat to learn that the carrier coming out means a stressful day. This protocol will help you teach your cat that the carrier isn't all too bad.

Getting Started:

Make sure the carrier is big enough that your cat can enter without having to duck or compress their body, and that they can turn around comfortably. Pick a place to set the carrier up and leave it there at all times, even when you're not training. Ideally, it would be in a location that is in a quieter part of the home where your cat would be apt to lay down and relax, so pick a spot that you think your cat will enjoy the most. Think of this as becoming another bed or resting location for your cat.

We're going to start by taking the carrier apart, leaving only the bottom half of the carrier set up. Set the top half, the door, and hardware in a safe place so that you won't lose anything but away from the carrier location. Pick out some bedding that your cat finds comfortable, such as a thick towel, soft blanket, etc., to use as bedding for the bottom of the carrier. You want it to be thick enough that it offers a comfortable resting spot but not too thick or bulky that it interferes with them being able to enter or exit the carrier.

Notes:

- Keep sessions short (5-10 minutes), and stop at the first signs of any stress.
- Do not move on to the next step unless your cat remains calm and relaxed.
- Use high-value treats that your cat really likes, and they can even be used exclusively for the carrier training.
- Wait for your cat to perform each step 5 consecutive times before moving on to the next. Your cat should be soft, relaxed, and walk into the carrier without hesitation on the current step before advancing.
- Stay on the current step if they perform 3 out of 5 times successfully, and drop to the previous step if they perform 2 out of 5 times or less and/or if you see any signs of stress or arousal.
- This protocol can be performed with or without a clicker. It is written with the intention of using a clicker, but you can use a marker word in place of the click, if you'd like or if your cat does not prefer the sound of a clicker.

Teaching the behavior:

1. Begin with your half carrier set up in the permanent location with the bedding inside the carrier.
2. Lure your cat into the half carrier with the treats, placing them at the front of the carrier so they only need to put their head through the threshold to eat.
3. When they put their head into the carrier, click or mark the action.

4. After your cat successfully eats the treat at the front of the carrier five consecutive times, place the treat a little further back, so now your cat needs to take a step into the carrier. Click each time your cat steps a paw into the carrier. Move to the next step after 5 consecutive successes.
5. Next drop a treat a little further back (approximately halfway or more), so now your cat takes two steps in. Click and reward, moving forward after 5 consecutive successes.
6. Continue to drop treats further to the back of the carrier, and reward for each additional steps/paw that they place in the carrier.

Throughout this process, allow them to exit the carrier at will, and offer plenty of opportunity for breaks. When your cat is walking into the carrier with all four paws, be sure to continue to reward them as they remain in the carrier, including giving treats, petting and talking to them, etc. At this stage, you should also reward them any time they go into the carrier on their own, without having to lure them. Your cat should also be comfortable and observed resting in the carrier on their own outside of training session times before moving on to the next steps.

7. Place the top of the carrier back onto the bottom. Do not worry about fastening it yet in case you need to return to previous steps.
8. At this point, your cat should be comfortable enough with the carrier from the previous steps that they walk into it without a lure. Click and reward them for stepping in with any amount of paws.
9. Maintain a high rate of reinforcement for them stepping into and remaining in the carrier, approximately 1 treat per second
10. Gradually back off your rate of reinforcement as your cat settles in and becomes more comfortable. You'll see them turn around so they're now looking out the front of the carrier, lay down, etc. Allow them to exit at will but continue to reward them for staying in, dropping your rate of reinforcement from 1 treat per 1 second to now every 3 seconds, 5 seconds, etc.
11. If/when your cat exits and then returns to the carrier, click and reward them again for entering.

Again, your cat should be comfortable enough with the carrier that you observe them sleeping or otherwise resting and spending time in it on their own outside of the training sessions.

12. Add the door back onto your carrier and fasten the top back to the bottom of the carrier.
13. Repeat the same process as when you placed the top on the carrier, rewarding your cat for walking into the carrier on their own.
14. Once they are walking in with all four paws on their own, you can begin closing the door for 1 second, then reward them, then open the door again, allowing them to exit at will.
15. After 5 consecutive successes with no signs of stress, extend the amount of time the door is closed for, from 1 second to 3 seconds to 5 seconds to 10 seconds.
16. Now close the door, latch, reward and then open, again repeating the 1 second, 3 second, 5 second, and 10 second progression.
17. After your cat is comfortable with the door being closed and latched, you can now begin picking the carrier up. Begin by picking the carrier up, setting it down, and reward your cat. Then take a few steps, set back down, reward, and build up the amount of steps you take each time.