

Behaviour matters

Introducing cats to the great outdoors

The outside world provides a whole array of exciting sights, sounds and smells for cats and, while some cats may be indoor-only due to medical reasons or personal preference for example, the vast majority of cats in the UK are provided with outdoor access.

Whether you have recently adopted a cat or are considering letting your previously indoor-only cat have outdoor access for the first time, many owners can understandably feel a little daunted by the prospect. In particular, trying to train a cat to use a cat flap can at times cause frustration for some owners. However, fear not as our handy guide will provide practical tips on gradually introducing your cat to the great outdoors.

A practical consideration to think about before getting started is that newly adopted cats should remain indoors until they have fully adjusted to their new home and know where their food will be coming from – this usually takes between three to four weeks. It is in the cat and owner's best interests that cats are neutered, vaccinated and microchipped prior to any outdoor excursions.

How to get a cat to come when they are called

An important aspect of letting a cat outside is their ability to come back when called. We often think of teaching a recall as something reserved purely for dogs, but many cat owners do this too, often without realising it! Rattling the cat biscuits often brings cats



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running as they are quick to learn associations which result in food. Investing time in teaching a cat to return to the home when called is a vital but often overlooked step and will help to reduce any anxieties when letting cats outside for the first time.

Start by sitting on the floor about a metre in front of your cat, in whichever room they happen to be in. Do this at a time when your cat is awake and ready to engage with you. A sleepy cat is much less likely to want to get involved. If your cat does not already know their name, simply say their name in a higher pitched, positive way, and 'lure' them towards you by showing them a tasty treat. Only reward the cat by giving them the treat once they have come over to you. With all training, it relies upon repetition of the same action. So move a metre away from your cat and repeat the process above to encourage them towards you again. Cats are generally much brighter than we give them credit for and most will pick this up quickly.

Once your cat is consistently coming towards you for a treat, you can introduce a command word after their name, such as 'Poppy, come!'. It can be useful for cats to learn to differentiate between their own name being used when you want their attention, versus a command word asking them to come towards you.

The next step is to build up the difficulty level by sitting further away from your cat in the same room, and calling them to you. From there, you can experiment with different rooms within the house and then upstairs or downstairs when your cat is on a different floor to you. ▶





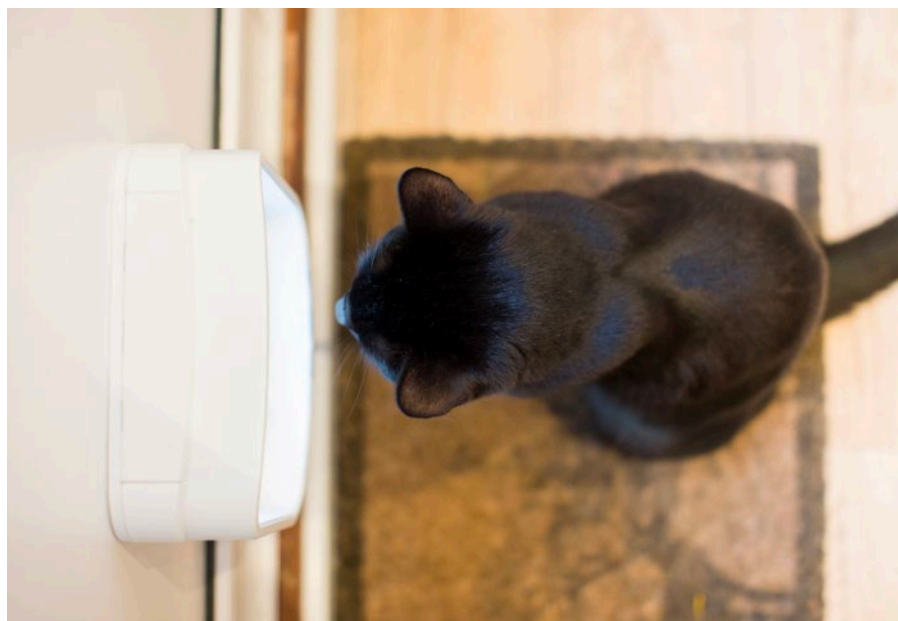
How to get a cat used to the cat flap

While seeing outside through the cat flap may be enough to encourage some cats to start investigating, batting the flap until they learn through trial and error that it can be opened to allow access, many cats will benefit from being given a helping paw.

When selecting a cat flap, choose one that only allows exclusive entry to your cat, such as a microchip cat flap or a magnetic one whereby the cat wears a magnet on a quick-release collar. This will help prevent any neighbourhood cats from entering the house, which cats find very stressful and could cause unwanted behaviours such as spraying or over-grooming.

Initially, cats need to learn to comfortably go through the cat flap opening and this can be achieved by pinning open the cat flap using string. Like with learning a recall, tasty treats will help to encourage your cat through the hole and then can be given as a reward once they are successfully through. If your cat is more nervous, you may need to work at a slower pace to suit them and they may prefer to spend some time sniffing and investigating the cat flap first.

Once the cat comfortably goes through a couple of times and is rewarded straight away with something they like, you can gradually lower how high the cat flap is held so your cat gets more confident with it until it is no longer propped open. Using the same technique, start to lengthen the string so the flap is still open but they have to lift it a little as they walk through it. Allow your cat to become familiar with the sensation of pressure from the flap resting on their neck, back and tail and then



gradually lengthen the string until they are happy to use the cat flap as normal. Bear in mind that you will need to train your cat to go through the cat flap on both sides. Just because they've mastered the art of going outside, does not mean that they will be able to get back inside again! Use the same process as before to break this down into manageable steps.

Some cats may panic if the door is closed

Introducing cats to the outside world

The commonly believed old wives' tale of putting butter on a cat's paws in order to encourage them to stay close to home is a myth and unhelpful when introducing cats outside. A more effective way to help cats make the transition to outdoor access is to pick a day when you are home all day, and open the door to give your cat the choice

of going outside. Do this before feeding your cat so that you can practise calling them inside after a few minutes and rewarding them with a treat. The treat will need to be something extra special to encourage them to return as the outside world is very distracting with all its tempting sights and smells. Allow the cat to go outside again if they wish so that they don't associate coming back indoors with being locked inside. It is important to keep the door open so that the cat has the option to return to the house whenever they wish as some cats may panic if the door is closed while they are outside. It is certainly true that patience is a virtue and if your cat is hesitant about going outside, do not be tempted to pick them up and carry them outside. Cats need to feel in control at all times.

Hopefully by taking time to introduce your cat outside carefully with lots of patience and a few treats, you'll have a happy cat which can confidently use the cat flap and return when you call, unless something more interesting takes their fancy! ●