



UNDERSTANDING YOUR CAT

The information in this booklet is intended as a general guide only

In order to develop a bond between you and your new cat, you want to make sure that all your interaction with her is positive and rewarding for you both. In order to achieve this you must be able to understand or 'read' your cat so that you can gauge what type of interaction they enjoy and what type annoys or frustrates them.

Whilst you will almost certainly never fully understand what is going on inside your cat's mind, you can gain a general understanding of how she's feeling by learning and interpreting her body language.

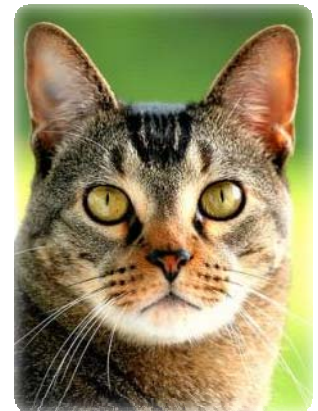
Cat Eyes

Cats reveal their emotion through their eyes. If you wish to make friends with your new cat, try to avoid staring directly at it. Instead, half close your eyes - this is known as a 'cat smile' and it will help your cat relax. You can tell your cat is relaxed because it will not have its eyes totally open and will return these 'cat smiles' back to you.



Above: a playful cat's widely dilated pupils

If you are interacting with your cat in a relaxed way (i.e. stroking, massaging, cuddling) and its eyes suddenly become very dilated (see left), stop what you are doing and ignore the cat for a few minutes. Dilated pupils can be a sign that the cat is frightened, frustrated or over excited (and may start to 'play' bite). A relaxed cat will not have dilated pupils unless the light levels are very low or they are unwell.



Above: this cat is active, observant and outside in the sunlight, so its eyes are narrowly dilated.

A sudden narrowing or widening of the pupils can indicate anger and fear, but it can also indicate that they have a sudden interest in something around them. This means that a cat's pupils dilate when they are feeling negative emotions, but also when they become happy to play. If you are confused about which emotion the cat is feeling, look to other body language signals to help you understand.

The Ears, Whiskers and Tail

The ears, whiskers and tail will give you further clues as to what a cat may be feeling.

Ears

Cats have between twenty and thirty muscles in the ears, making the ears very useful for communicating. Cats can also swivel their ears in a half circle, and can move each one by itself. When a cat is relaxed, its ears will sit slightly back on its head or in an upright position. If it is in an excited or alert state the ears will spring forward and if frightened or threatened the ears will sit flat and back against the head.

Whiskers

When a cat is relaxed, its whiskers will be held back flat against the face and when fearful, the whiskers will be pulled back even further. When a cat is in an excited or playful state, ready to pounce on something, it will bring its whiskers forward and puff up its face, and focus on the object they are about to pounce on.



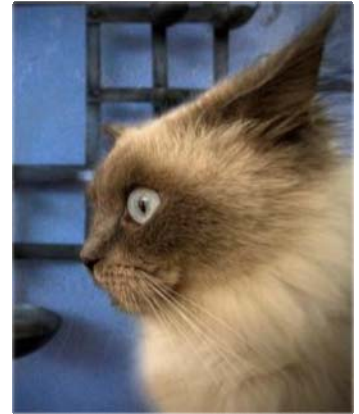
Above: an example of a friendly, social greeting from a cat; note the upright, tail kinked at the end - this cat would be likely to then rub against its owner's leg or find a lap for a smooch!

Tail

The way in which a cat holds its tail is also a very important judge of how it's feeling. When relaxed, a cat will hold its tail upright with a slight kink (or 'bend') in the end. This is a friendly, social greeting. However, when a cat is playful, excited, cautious or actively checking out what's going on around it, it will hold its tail lower to the ground and may swish it horizontally from side to side.

Touching and 'Patting'

Touch is used in many types of healing therapies for both humans and many types of animals. It is a very useful tool for helping cats to relax, however the type of touch and when it is applied is critical in how effective it is in calming a cat. Stroking a cat all over gently may sooth a cat, but if done for too long, it may over-stimulate and annoy the cat. It is important to read the cat's body-language (as described above) whilst massaging or patting your cat.



Right: This cat is frightened by something - notice its ears sitting back far against the head and the whiskers flat against the face.



Above: a cat about to pounce - notice the whiskers are puffed forward.

Below: pat a cat on the neck, and around the chin and chest area

How to touch your cat

Cats are very sensitive on particular areas of their body such as their stomachs, back legs and around the base of the tail, so avoid touching these areas. Cats can get over-stimulated quickly, so it's best to keep touch or patting sessions to less than 10 minutes. Cats also prefer to have interaction often and in short bursts than long sessions less often.

The safest place to touch cats is around their ears, head, and chest and chin area. Most cats will enjoy long strokes along the body, but be careful not to over-pat this way; two or three long strokes is enough, then allow the cat to approach you and pat it on the head or chin.

How your cat touches you

Your cat will touch you in different ways. If she is rubbing the side of her face on you, then she is marking you with her scent. Scent is a very important communication tool for cats; however it is not how they greet each other socially. Friendly greeting behaviour involves head butts, touching with the top of the head, body rubs, as well as tails held high with a slight kink at the end.

If you find that your cat begins to circle you or becomes vocal whilst you are patting it, you may get a 'love bite'. This is when a cat gets over-stimulated and releases that energy with a small bite. You can try and avoid your cat getting to this stage by keeping touch sessions short. If a cat that you are patting begins behaving this way, say nothing, distract it with a toy and throw the toy away from you so that the cat will chase it and you can move away.

It is not a good idea to encourage 'rough play' in your cat or kitten. This can lead to anti-social behaviour where she bites every time you try to pat her. This may be cute and manageable in a small kitten, but try having your hand attacked by a full grown cat - not much fun!

If you can learn these body language signals, you will be able to understand how your cat is feeling, which will in turn allow you to bond more strongly with you new cat and make it easier for her to bond with you.



Bad Behaviour

If your cat is a kitten when you adopt him or her, it is very important to immediately establish 'house rules' and the kind of behaviour that is and is not acceptable.

For example, if the idea of an adult cat jumping up on the kitchen bench is undesirable to you, then do not allow your cat to do when he is a kitten! Behaviours such as jumping up on the bench are established during kitten hood and often difficult to break once formed.

Similarly, allowing your kitten to 'play fight' with your hand, foot, arms or any other part of your body will also establish bad behaviours. This kind of play will teach your cat that it's okay (and even fun!) to play rough with humans. Whilst this type of behaviour may seem cute in a kitten, it's not so fun as the kitten grows into a cat and

you find yourself fending off his pin-sharp teeth and claws whilst trying to engage in some innocent play!

Teaching 'no rough play'

Rough play is best left to kittens and cats to engage in with each other, where it is a natural behaviour and important for their development. If your kitten does start to play 'rough' with you, there are a few steps you can take to help him understand that the behaviour is unacceptable.

First and foremost - NEVER HIT YOUR CAT! Hitting your cat or kitten will do nothing except teach it to be fearful of you (and eventually all humans).

Rough play can often carry on from a cuddling or play session, when it seems that your cat has suddenly 'turned' on you and starts attacking you. This may mean that your cat has become 'over-stimulated' (see above in 'how to touch your cat'). The best way to deal with this is to immediately remove either yourself or your cat from the situation.

Distract your cat with a toy or a loud noise and then quickly walk away from him, ignoring him if he follows you. If he continues to follow you around, then shut him in another room for a brief 'time-out' until he calms down.

Modifying unwanted behaviours

If your cat or kitten is engaging in behaviour that you find unacceptable (such as jumping up on the bench, scratching the lounge etc) you can stop the behaviour by using one of the following behaviour modification techniques:

Spray bottle: fill a spray bottle with water and using the 'jet' spray setting, spray your cat (not near the face) AS SOON AS you see him begin to engage in the unwanted behaviour. The jet spray should startle your cat enough to stop the behaviour as long as you can catch him at the right moment. There is no use spraying him after the fact (even if it is only a few minutes or seconds after).

Loud noise: roll up a newspaper and as with the technique above, when you catch him engaging in the unwanted behaviour smack the newspaper down on a hard surface (such as the kitchen bench or the table) in order to make a loud startling noise.

With both of these techniques, they must be repeated a few times, each at the exact time that the cat is engaging in the behaviour. Also, it is extremely important that you either spray the water or make the loud noise at a distance from your cat. You want your cat to correlate these startling occurrences with the behaviour they are engaging in at the time, NOT with you!



Above: rough play is a natural behaviour between cats, but not a good way for cats and owners to interact

If you require further advice or help with your new companion cat, please contact the
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