



Nine Cat Behavior Lessons for Humans

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Many households are adding new cats to their families. This can be a trying time for some, but the difficulties can be minimized if you understand some basic cat behavior. We have only recently started to understand just how different feline behavior is from that of many other types of animals. Although we have a lot still to learn, what follows is my list of things people should know about how cats behave and interact.

1. Cats are social and left on their own will form matriarchal groups. However, they do not *need* feline or human companionship in most cases. Much research has been conducted in this area, thanks in part to the many feral colonies that in recent years have been developed with consistent care. Observing these colonies, researchers have found that mothers and their daughters tend to form groups, often sharing in kitten-rearing duties. Related males may also stay in the group, and unrelated males may join it, but unrelated females typically are not allowed in. This is one reason why housing two unrelated adult female cats in the same household can be difficult.

2. Cats form social groups with as few as one member in multicat households. An example: A household with three cats could have three groups (each comprising one cat), two groups (one with one member, the other with two), or a single group of three. Cats in the same group will groom one another, play together, and sleep together. Figuring out which cat is in which group can be difficult without a lot of observation over a fairly long period, but mutual grooming (the technical term is *allogrooming*) is an important clue. In general, only cats that are in the same social group groom one another.

3. Cats are subtle creatures, and nowhere is this more evident than in aggression behavior. For example, cats that do not physically fight do not necessarily belong to the same social group. Many cats display aggression toward others simply by looking at them. “The Stare” is a behavior commonly used by cats that are litter box guarding. One cat will position itself so it can see the access route to a litter box. When another cat enters the access route, the guarding cat will give the other cat an aggressive stare, and the cat needing the litter box will go and find a less dangerous place to urinate or defecate. This is one of the most common reasons for house-soiling problems in multicat households. Cats have many subtle ways of being aggressive to other cats in the same environment, most of which do not involve actual physical contact. Often the aggressor is the quieter of the cats in a nonphysical altercation. That is, the cat making the scream-like vocalizations is probably not the instigator. Such vocalizations are usually a defensive response. Look to the other cat as the troublemaker.

4. Violence begets violence. If you have an upset cat, yelling, spraying it with water, or using other aggressive means to break up a fight may cause more violence because it further excites the cats. A better approach is to startle the cats in order to shift their focus away from each other. Quietly separating the cats (if you can do so without endangering yourself!) is an even more effective response. Cats are highly visual. Thus, if two fighting cats can't see each other, they will usually calm down. Placing a piece of cardboard between them so they can't see each other often works to stop the yowling and growling. If you need to modify behavior in an aggressive cat, try using time outs at the first sign of any aggression. Just be sure you send the aggressor to timeout, or you'll be rewarding bad behavior! For this method to work, you'll need to apply it consistently over not just days or weeks but possibly months.

5. Cats use social signals to communicate. These are primarily odor, voice, body posture, and facial expressions.

The most commonly used odor signals are face marking and tail marking. Cats rub their faces and the tops of their tails on items to mark them as places that are home. This marking tells other cats who has been there and that another cat considers this area to be a part of its domain. Urine and feces marking is a stronger signal that cats most commonly use when they are threatened by the presence of cats not in their social group or to advertise that they are sexually available. Both male and female cats mark in this way, and unspayed and unneutered cats do this a *lot* more commonly than "fixed" cats.

Voice is used extensively in communication between cats. Cats can make many vocalizations and appear to engage in complex vocal interactions with other cats. If you are interested in hearing examples of cat communication, the following link may interest you: <http://blog.nus.edu.sg/lsm1303/2011/03/23/domestic-cat-vocalisations/>.

Most human beings can recognize a cat that is happy to see them: it puts its tail straight up and shows a "friendly" face. At the opposite end of the body posture spectrum are the postures a cat might use to help it avoid a close confrontation with an unknown cat. These postures are menacing and designed to make the cat look larger by, for example, arching its back, standing its back hair straight up, and fluffing its tail. Body posture can be seen from a considerable distance, so it is most useful in dealing with cats that aren't in close proximity.

Facial expressions are for close-up communication. Eye, whisker, and ear positions are all important in these expressions. If you think about the look on your cat's face when you pet it, compared to when it is getting ready to pounce on a favorite toy, you can get some idea of how cats use their faces to communicate. And feline facial expressions aren't all about showing aggression. Cats don't smile like we do, but they do have an expression that means the same thing!

Most cats try their best to avoid physical contact with cats outside their social group because physical fights are dangerous to the well-being of all cats involved. Feline signaling methods are

a useful way of keeping an unfriendly cat at bay, as well as for communicating with friends.

6. We human beings tend to be bad at smelling, seeing, and hearing the signals cats commonly use. This causes us all sorts of grief. Making the effort to learn more about how your cat communicates will pay off richly.

7. Cats do not like to eat near their water. Cats consider water that is near food to be contaminated. This goes back to the fact that cats are hunters. When they catch prey, things can get messy, leaving nearby water contaminated. While our indoor cats are not usually catching prey, the instinct of the hunter is still strong.

8. Each cat will have a core area where it likes to eat, drink, and play. If you're uncertain where your cats' core areas are, watch for where they take naps. These are great places to position toys and scratching posts or scratching pads so that when the cat wakes up and wants to stretch and sharpen its claws it has an appropriate surface on which to do so. Cats, like people, don't like to live in the bathroom, so litter boxes should be placed somewhere other than their core area.

9. Cats have only a few activities that entertain them or give them pleasure. These are hunting/playing, eating, interacting with human beings, and (sometimes) interacting with other cats. Our cats' happiness is thus in large part dependent on us, their human caretakers, providing an environment that fulfills their needs so they can live happy, low-stress lives. The less entertainment and pleasure cats have, the lower their quality of life will be and the higher their risk for stress-related illness and behavioral problems.

For information on creating a wonderful, rich environment for your cat, an excellent resource is Dr. Tony Buffington's Indoor Cat Initiative (<http://indoorpet.osu.edu/cats/>) at the Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine.