

# Communicating with Your Cat

You and your cat may speak different languages, but that doesn't mean you can't communicate with each other.

While every cat is different, there is a common code of expression—a set of signals—that you can learn to read easily. Indicators such as the look in your cat's eyes, the tone of her voice, the position of her ears and the motion of her tail can provide important clues regarding your companion's feelings and intentions.

## Talk to Your Cat

For starters, you can talk to your cat. Some people feel silly speaking to cats, because they think animals can't understand them. Yet these same people might feel comfortable carrying on long one-sided conversations with infants. Cats do receive information from your conversation: praise, comfort and a sense of security.

## Listen

You can get information, too. The more cats are spoken to, the more they will speak back. You will learn a lot from your cat's wide vocabulary of chirps and meows. You will know when it is time to get up (at least in your cat's opinion), when your cat is feeling affectionate, or when your cat is feeling threatened or is in pain. Your cat doesn't necessarily have something urgent to tell you; a passing meow in the hallway may be a simple hello.

## Body Language

You can also tell a great deal about what cats want or how they are feeling simply by the look in their eyes or their reaction to things. Are your cat's ears twitching in your direction like satellite dishes when you are speaking? He is absorbing everything you are saying.

Does your cat's back rise up to meet your hand when you pet him? This means your cat is enjoying this contact with you. Does his back seem to collapse away under your slightest touch? Your cat is on his way somewhere and doesn't want to be held up, even by a favorite person.

If your cat crouches low to the ground, he is feeling uneasy. If your cat stands on his toes, you are probably being asked to pick him up. Raised hair on the back and a puffed-out tail are universal signs of hostility or defensiveness. But how about a quivering tail? That is the greatest expression of adoration any cat can bestow upon a human. But a thrashing tail shows the mood has shifted to intense agitation.



## Be Positive

Most kittens are eager to learn how to please

you. You can easily correct behavior in a young cat with a gentle, but firm tone and a demonstration of the proper way to do things. Praise your kitten when you point out the litter box and scratching post.

Depending upon how happy and peaceful their former lives were, older cats can be a little more difficult to teach, but they are well worth the effort. Patience and kindness should help maintain most ground rules. Hitting your pet is cruel and accomplishes nothing—it will only teach your cat to be afraid of you. A good discipline tool is a spray bottle filled with water.

Catch the cat in the act of scratching the sofa or jumping on the sink and spritz the culprit with a gentle spray of water. (Your cat will associate the behavior with the unpleasant experience of water, but will not associate you with the unpleasant experience.) Then be sure to offer your cat an acceptable outlet for his behavior, and praise him when he does the right thing.

## Look For Signals

Cats are not spiteful creatures—that's one of their most admirable qualities. Contrary to popular assumption, a cat who has a lapse in remembering ground rules or stops using the litter box is not trying to get even with or punish her owner. Your cat might be feeling out of balance, and these signs should alert you that your cat might be unwell or that something else is amiss. There probably is a good reason for this behavior, and it's up to you to figure out what it is.

A cat who stops using the litter box, for example, could be getting a bladder infection. Cats will associate the litter pan with the pain they feel upon urinating and avoid using the litter, or the cat might not like the brand of litter you've started using, or the cat might not feel comfortable using the box where it is kept.

Other things that might disturb your cat might have to do with your behavior: Have you changed your routine or are you under stress or feeling sad? Cats' behavior can alter with any alteration in their routine or environment, such as a new cat or a new home. If abnormal behavior persists, have your veterinarian check your cat for any medical problems. If no medical problems exist, your veterinarian might suggest an animal behavior specialist.

## Mischievous Cat? He Just Might Be Bored

Mr. Whiskers has done it again: He's knocked over the potted plants, batted belongings off the dresser and chased people around the house.



Cats like Mr. Whiskers aren't just rebellious. Sometimes, they're just bored.

### Signs of Boredom

Those who share their home with a cat might be under the impression that their companion lolls about the house all day, doing nothing at all. On the contrary, cats—for the most part—are more inclined to spend their days playing.

If they're bored, they might meow, chase or pester, escape or engage in repetitive behavior like knocking objects off shelves. They entertain themselves and might think it's fun to be destructive, especially when that behavior attracts their person's attention.

It's important—even when the cat knocks over the plant that was just repotted—not to punish him. After ensuring he has a clean bill of health, assess his needs at home, paying close attention to his personality, which will give hints to his mental and physical needs. Younger or more social cats usually require more stimulation than older or shy cats.

### Banish Boredom

Using a toy or game to play with a cat usually helps him release his energy. Cats have a natural prey drive and love testing their pouncing, stalking or chasing skills. Even a paper grocery type sack (handles removed) makes for a fun game of hide-and-seek.

Some cats will even fetch a ball if thrown to them, and positive reinforcement can be used to teach cats tricks.

Banishing kitty boredom can be as simple as setting up a bird feeder outside a window. For cats who enjoy climbing, a tall scratching post with perches could do the trick.

It can be a challenge to figure out which activity any cat likes best, but—above all—don't force him to do something he doesn't want to do. Find an activity or toy that he already enjoys. He'll be less likely to be bored and destructive if he has playtime scheduled with his favorite person.

### Favorite Hiding Places

A cat will hide for all sorts of reasons, whether it's the sudden appearance of the cat carrier (indicating an upcoming car trip), or the frightening noise of the vacuum cleaner. Some cats simply do not feel sociable while you have company visiting (human or animal). Unless you are in a hurry to make that veterinarian appointment or to catch a flight, leave your cat alone for a little while. She will probably come out later when she's feeling more sociable. However, seek out your cat if she misses the next meal or will not come out of her hiding place for a longer period of time—it could be an indication of illness.

The best way to find a hiding cat is to ask yourself this question: "If I were a cat, where would I hide?" Start with these favorite spots:

- Under the skirt flap of an upholstered chair
- In the fireplace
- Behind books
- Behind the bathtub
- Behind the ironing board
- In a drawer
- In a laundry basket
- Under the bed
- In a torn mattress lining
- Behind the drapes
- Behind an open door
- On top of the kitchen cupboards
- In the folds of a lumpy comforter



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