



CAT COMMUNICATION

What is your cat trying to tell you?

Communication is important for every relationship; without an understanding of what someone is trying to tell you, we are left to assume intentions. We know how dangerous that is in human relationships, and it can also be detrimental to the bond you have with your cat.

Poker Faces

Cats have “poker face”, which means they are experts at concealing their feelings. You might be guilty of anthropomorphizing onto cats; you attribute/assume human feelings about what your cat is feeling. This is risky because the cat is probably thinking/feeling something totally different from what you’ve concocted in your mind. For instance, when a cat brings prey into the house, most people say, “He brought me a gift.” when in fact, your cat may simply be trying to get his dinner into a “safe zone” where other predators don’t steal it from him. Another theory on why cats bring prey to you is they are trying to teach you to hunt in the same way their mothers taught them. The important point with these illustrations is cats are mysterious little creatures whose motivations are often misunderstood.

Cats communicate in 4 ways:

Olfactory, Visual, Auditory and Vocal. Olfactory signals are the most important communication tools for cats because it is their most refined sense and they can be used at any time of the day.

1. Olfactory communication is the key to cats’ perception.

Cats use olfactory communication as chemical warnings and community scent tools (urine, feces, saliva, scents from glands on paws, face and tail.) Cats rely on their acute ability to differentiate between odors to establish territory borders and to recognize friend or foe. Urine is an important territory marker and a cat will often urinate along the perimeter of a home if he sees cats outside. They also use urine as a bonding tool; if a cat pees in a place that smells like you (the bed, for instance) it could be an attempt to “mix scents” with you and often indicates a cat who is fearful of you. When your cat head butts you and rubs the side of his face on you, he is leaving behind his unique scent, “claiming” you as his own.

There are powerful scent glands between the cat’s toes and when a cat scratches your furniture it leaves both a visual and scent marker to other cats, establishing that territory as theirs.

Always allow a cat to smell you before you touch them; it’s important for them to read where you’ve



been before they want that scent mixed with theirs. And remember how sensitive their noses are - avoid strong perfumes, heavy air fresheners and scented candles.

2. Body language is a cat’s visual communication.

A cat communicates with every single part of his body; from his whiskers to the tip of his tail. Each and every posture is an important key to how he is feeling and reacting to you. Whiskers either pushed way forward or flat against cheeks, dilated pupils, lowered tail and weight shifted away from you communicates feelings of stress or fear. A happy cat has relaxed whiskers, forward ears, straight up tail, normal pupils and will be moving toward you.

It’s very important to respect your cat’s comfort zone. If your cat exhibits any visual signs of stress, avoid looking directly at him. Allow cats to approach you on their own terms; if a cat moves away when you reach to them, back away and honor their feelings.

3. The auditory frequencies a cat can hear are very high.

Cats hear much higher-pitched sounds than we can, up to 64 kHz, which is 1.6 octaves above ours - higher than dogs can hear. Cats can hear mice squeaking and bats communicating.

If we talk in high-pitched voices, cats relate to us better - perhaps we naturally know this and that’s why we talk to cats in our baby voice. Also, classical music has frequencies that are the least stressful for cats - leave it playing when the cat is alone during the day.

4. Vocalizing is not normal for cats.

Kittens meow to moms but once grown cats don’t often vocalize with other cats - they do so only in the presence of humans. Tone and melody of cat vocalization varies and is important to the message, for instance, the more variation in the melody the more excited or urgent the message seems to be.

Cats make a variety of sounds - chirps, meows, chirrups, hisses, chatter, hiss, purr, mew, miau, yowl, caterwaul (usually heard when a female is in heat) and trilling, to name a few. Trilling is a friendly greeting to you. Purring is a steady rumbling that often means “I’m happy”, but it is also used when cats are feeling distress or pain.

If you don’t understand what your cat is trying to say to you, try imitating the sound back and see what happens. He may give you a clue by looking at the food bowl if it’s empty.

If your cat is howling constantly, first rule out a medical issue, as this is an indication of discomfort. If there is no medical issue, and you don’t want them to vocalize so much, as with all unwanted behaviors, you want to interrupt the behavior before it starts. Ignore the meowing while it’s happening; responding in any way only reinforces the behavior, since it is very likely to be attention-seeking.

Avoid situations that lead to vocalizing. Watch for patterns in the behavior: what time of day is it happening and antecedents. Remove stressful components in the environment and provide more companionship, interactive play, exercise and enrichment. Positively reinforce quiet times.

Annoying Communication

I hear a lot of people ask me “Why does my cat paw at me?” or walk across your keyboard and most often it’s to illicit a response from you = attention-seeking. ANY kind of response from these antics will reinforce the behavior so it is best to ignore attention-seeking behaviors you don’t want, and they will eventually fade away.



Email me your cat communication stories to Molly@CatBehaviorSolutions.org



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Molly DeVoss is a cat expert and a Certified Feline Training and Behavior Specialist. She is the Executive Director of Cat Behavior Solutions, a Trainer/Mentor for The Jackson Galaxy Project Cat Pawsitive Pro, and host of Cat Talk Radio. She has over a decade experience working with one of the highest volume shelters in the U.S. Quite simply, Molly is a cat sleuth. She figures out why cats do what they do and educates cat guardians on how to modify those behaviors when they become difficult to live with.