

Communicating with Your Cat



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You and your cat may speak different languages, but that doesn't mean that 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.

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 may feel comfortable carrying on long one-sided conversations with infants. Cats do receive information from your conversation: praise, comfort, and a sense of security.

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.

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 up your cat. 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.

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 may 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.

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 may be feeling out of balance, and these signs should alert you that your cat may 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, may 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 may not like the brand of litter you've started using, or the cat may not feel comfortable using the box where it is kept. Other things that may disturb your cat may have to do with your behavior: Have you changed your routine or are you under stress or feeling sad? Cats' behavior may 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 may suggest an animal behavior specialist.