



**A cat's posture, even the movements of the tail, can give you a clue as to what she is thinking.**

## Understanding Cat Behavior

Before you can tackle behavior problems, you need to know a little bit about cat behavior and what your cat is trying to tell you.

There are so many fascinating ways that cats communicate with each other. Some of their methods are so subtle that we humans are not sensitive enough to understand what they are saying. Cats often use mild and controlled signs of body language. A minor flick of the tail or the slightest movement of the ears send messages that are worth a thousand words to another cat.

But since their body language is so restrained, we often find it difficult to comprehend, so we end up making mistakes trying to interpret their messages. It's easier for us to discern what cats are saying when they use their voices. Their range of sounds -- from a gentle purr to a seething hiss -- let us know if a cat is happy or angry. Once we learn to make sense of the body language and the vocalizations of cats, we are one step closer to understanding cat behavior.

### **Nature or Nurture?**

In the study of behavior, experts talk about nature versus nurture, meaning which behaviors are inbred (or instinct) and which are learned. It's an argument that will probably never be completely settled. Most experts agree, however, that animals like cats and dogs have both kinds of behavior; they just disagree on which ones are which -- and which kind is more important.

An example of an instinctual behavior would be what happens when you run your hand down the cat's back, from his head to his tail. That response of sticking his backside up in the air is hardwired into his nervous system. A learned behavior is something like your cat running into the kitchen whenever he hears the can opener. That is, if you've ever fed him anything out of a can.

**Reflex actions.** Classical animal behavior talks about reflexes and has its own nature versus nurture debate. Unconditioned reflexes are those the body seems to produce on its own. For example, if you kick your leg up when the doctor taps your knee with a rubber hammer. A conditioned reflex is a learned response. Most of us have heard of Pavlov's dog, who was trained to know that food was coming whenever he heard a bell ring. After awhile, Doc Pavlov could ring the bell and his dog would start salivating -- even if there was no food present.

**The great debate resolved.** Actually, even Pavlov had to admit that his conditioned dog didn't have a completely learned response. If there wasn't an instinctive response of salivating in the presence of food to begin with, Pavlov could never have trained the dog to do it when he heard the bell. What Pavlov really proved was that animals are born with a set of instinctive, natural behaviors, and they learn how to apply and adapt them as needed.

**What it all means for your cat.** In order to train your cat, you need to understand his behavior. You'll never get him to do anything that's totally outside of his natural behaviors, but you can teach him how to adapt those behaviors so that both of you live happily ever after.

**The best example is the litter box:** Cats have the instinctive behavior of digging in loose materials and burying their urine and feces. As long as the litter box is the place that appeals to the cat most, that's where he'll consistently eliminate. However, he may be more intrigued by soil in your potted palm, the loose, fluffy pile of your carpeting, or the nice, soft pile of socks left in a corner of the utility room. As long as the behavior is shaped toward the litter box, you've got no problem.

## Speaking Feline

Obviously, cats don't have a spoken language like we do. But they do have a voice, and they make sounds that have different meanings. This is their means of communication. "Speaking feline" not only means understanding cats' vocalizations but also understanding the more complex language of cats -- body language.

**Cat "speech."** Cats make a variety of sounds that have been given colorful and descriptive names. Their purpose can range from expressing contentment to a call for help, from solicitation of food or companionship to a bloodcurdling expression of stark terror.

The classic cat sound (or vocalization) is the meow. Newborn kittens will meow with surprising volume. These vocalizations are probably to indicate hunger or cold and to help the mother cat locate them. As the cat gets older, the meow is still used largely to solicit or attract attention (for example, if your cat wants to signal you that he feels it's time for dinner).

An angry, frightened, or aggressive cat may hiss, which is a clear warning that whoever or whatever is approaching should come no closer. Hissing is often accompanied by a yowl, a throaty warning sound that rises and falls. An extremely frightened or angry cat will scream -- a sound that needs no further explanation.

Calling or yodeling is that mournful, slightly spooky sound your cat makes (usually in the middle of the night) while wandering around the house. New cat owners (and even some veteran ones) sometimes mistake this normal vocalization for pain, confusion, or loneliness, assuming that their cat is in distress. Female cats in heat (estrus) yodel to signal their readiness to mate. The tomcat calls to the female to advertise his availability in a loud voice called caterwauling. This call also serves the purpose of warning rival males of his amorous intentions.

Three sounds are unique to cats. The chortle, a happy greeting sound, sounds a lot like a quick, high-pitched chuckle. There's also that strange chirping or chattering noise cats make that's usually reserved for when they see birds outside the window. This is the elusive wacka-wacka, a term coined by famed cat cartoonist B. Kliban. Finally, the purr is, of course, the most sublime of all feline sounds. It's also one of the most hotly debated.

While a supremely contented cat will purr loudly, so will an extremely nervous or stressed one. This leads some researchers to think cats do it to reassure themselves. It's not even completely clear how cats purr. Most of the wild members of the cat family purr, but the household variety of cat is about the only one that can make the sound on both the exhale and the inhale.

**Read my hips.** The lithe, often silent movements of a cat actually speak volumes. Every inch of your cat, from the nose to the tip of the tail, communicates something. We can think of the cat's state of mind as being more inward, more outward, or somewhere in between. A cat that is being defensive is more inward and will usually only attack if pursued. On the other hand, a cat that is ready to launch an offensive attack is more outward.

**The ears are a good marker of the how inward or outward a cat is feeling:** The farther back the ears are laid, the more inward the cat's state of mind. This also means a curious or friendly cat will have his ears pricked (forward and erect), since those are both outward states of mind.

**Wide-open eyes are an outward sign.** Other body and vocal signals will tell you if it's a good kind of outward, meaning that a happy or playful cat will have wide-open eyes but so will a terrified cat. Relaxed, open eyes reflect a more neutral internal state; relaxed, narrowed eyes usually means the cat's submissive, but it could also indicate a contented cat.

**The size of the cat's pupils also offer a clue to his feelings:** Dilated pupils may indicate fear while constricted pupils suggest aggressive feelings. A direct stare is an outward sign, meaning, "Back off, buster!"

**Even the position of a cat's mouth says something about his feelings.** The more open the mouth, usually the more outward the cat's state of mind. Again, this can be rage (lips drawn back, tense) or play (lips not drawn back, relaxed). Of course, if a cat also opens his mouth wide to hiss, spit, and show sharp teeth, it is definitely an indication of anger.

This strategy is played out in the familiar "Halloween cat" posture (sometimes called spidering or arching), where the cat turns sideways, arches his back, puffs up his hair, and hisses. This posture combines defensive elements (such as turning sideways) with clear threats (such as making himself look larger). On the other hand, when a cat makes himself smaller, by scrunching down, rolling to his side, or leaning away, he's trying to show that he's not a threat.



## Aggression and Play

When a cat becomes destructive, the owner is often shocked to hear the professional advice: Get a second cat. The owner's understandable concern is that two cats will do twice as much damage, and the destructive cat will now have another cat to shred. Fortunately, the former is rarely true, mostly because the cat's energy is focused on another cat.

**This also seems to make the latter a valid fear.** There must be a period of introduction, and some hissing and minor scuffles are normal. However, many multiple-cat owners witness normal vigorous feline play and are convinced the cats still aren't getting along.

**Play we must.** Play is an instinctive behavior. All mammals -- including cats, dogs, and people -- play. While play is more frequent and energetic in younger animals, adults play as well. In fact, play persists throughout an animal's lifetime.

**We must...but why?** For decades, animal behaviorists have argued that play -- like all instinctive behaviors -- must have some deeper reason behind it. Citing the theory of natural selection, they say that if play behavior was completely frivolous, it would be a waste of time and energy and would have been eradicated over time. Clearly, these researchers need to get out and have fun more often.

Play may well serve as practice for important adult behaviors, which is why so much of it looks like aggression. So when one cat hunkers down, twitches his backside, lashes his tail, and then pounces on his feline roommate, landing full on the unsuspecting victim's back and seizing his neck in his jaws, it's definitely play; the real-life use of that sequence of behavior is stalking and

killing prey. But researchers are finally, grudgingly admitting that play could have another purpose, one which humans have known about for time immemorial: It's fun!

**How do I know when it's for real?** Feline play is often no-holds-barred: noisy running, hot pursuit, pouncing, stalking, slamming bodies, wrestling, biting, the works. But in terms of vocalization, it's relatively quiet. An out-and-out catfight would include all the same behaviors as a fun bout of play but with lots of loud hissing, yowling, screaming, and flying fur. Play uses the same behaviors as aggression, but they are inhibited: There are smacks to the head but with claws retracted; bites but with relaxed jaws and exaggerated movements.

Other hallmarks of play include frequent changes in who's the aggressor -- who's on top in the wrestling match, who's chasing whom, or whose body language is more inward or outward -- and the play face (a relaxed, open jaw and wide-open eyes). If you doubt that humans use the play face just watch a bunch of schoolchildren heading out the door for recess!

**Bring out the best.** Now that you can recognize play behavior in your cat, you can make him happier and healthier by encouraging it. If there's only one cat in the home, you have the responsibility of being his playmate.

Cat toys are fine as long as they're safe, but your cat also needs you to play with him. Chasing, stalking, and pouncing games are at the top of the feline hit parade. Cats see moving edges better than stationary ones, so toys that wiggle, bounce, roll, or bob are particularly intriguing.

Even in multiple-cat households, the humans need to play with the cats. Play is a kind of "social glue," and the more your cats recognize humans as potential playmates, the better socialized to people they will be.

Just because you understand cat behavior doesn't mean you have to put up with it. There are steps you can take curb your cat's bad habits. In the next section, we will cover the basics of cat training

**You will not be able to get your cat to act like a person, but you can improve her behavior in smaller ways.**

## Cat-Training Basics

The cat is a very independent animal, and many cat owners will tell you that it is this independence that makes the cat such a comfortable companion around the house. Cats are not as demanding of attention as dogs. And, unlike dogs, most cats don't make any particular effort to win your approval -- they'll often wait for you to come to them rather than run around trying to catch your eye.

All this means that the cat is a very easy going creature who is polite and self-possessed. But it also means that it can be difficult to train a cat. If you and your cat don't see eye to eye over a certain kind of behavior, you might have a hard time getting him to do things your way. However, don't give up hope -- it's not completely impossible to modify your cat's behavior.

## Getting a Cat to Change His Ways

**Can a cat be trained?** Surprisingly, the answer is a resounding "Yes!" -- but it has to be done on feline terms. Everything in this article up to this point is background information, designed to help you see the world from your cat's perspective, which is an important key to training. You can train a cat to jump through hoops or roll over on command. However, a more valuable training goal is teaching him to stay within the boundaries of acceptable behavior in society.

**Emily Post for cats.** It's probably best to make your training goal to cultivate good manners in your cat. Manners can be defined as performing normal and natural cat behaviors in the places, at the times, and in the way that satisfies both human and feline needs. This means finding the middle ground -- in other words, what you can live with -- and sticking to it.

**Avoid bad habits.** When it comes to behavior problems, most cat owners don't think in terms of prevention -- and more's the pity. It may be cute when your 12-week-old kitten plays with your bare hand, but six months later when the now ten-pound beast sinks his full set of predator's teeth into your wrist, he's really only doing what he was taught to do.

So, the best rule of thumb to follow is a common sense one: Never encourage any behavior you don't want to see later on, and always discourage any behavior you never want to see again.

**Shape your cat's behavior.** It's important to realize that certain cat behaviors can't be discouraged completely; they can only be shaped into a form that is socially acceptable in your household. This is also known as behavior modification.

A good example is [scratching](#). This is an instinctive behavior for which many cats are declawed, lose their homes, or are even put to sleep each year. A better strategy is shaping the scratching behavior toward an acceptable object, such as a properly constructed scratching post, while simultaneously making other choices unpleasant or difficult.

The most successful, long-lasting, humane, and commonsense way to discipline a cat is positive reinforcement. The opposite method, negative reinforcement, punishes the animal for exhibiting a particular behavior in any way other than what the owner or trainer wants.

In the example of [scratching furniture](#), this would mean following the cat around the house 24 hours a day and correcting him every time he lays claw to upholstery. Since scratching is instinctive and can't be stopped, this method is doomed to failure anyway. Praising and petting the cat when he uses the post and offering minor corrections (not punishments) when he's caught in the act of scratching elsewhere will help modify the behavior.

Remedying behavior problems can't be done by "cookbook" means. Every individual cat is unique, which means every individual cat's behavior is unique. Most likely, you'll have to adapt remedies to fit your own cat's personality and the circumstances in your home. You're now armed with the basic tools you need to accomplish that. We'll begin looking at some specific remedies in the next page with cats that bite and scratch.



**A cat that scratches spontaneously or without provocation** could be the sign of a disorder or disease.

## Dealing With Cats That Bite and Scratch

You're walking down the hallway in your home, minding your own business, when suddenly your cat flings herself at your ankle, sinking in her teeth and claws, then dashes away. Is it an aggressive attack? An expression of jealousy? Possibly, but it might be neither.

A cat who bites or scratches when in pain, frightened, or being forced to do something she doesn't want to do doesn't have a behavior problem; she's acting like a normal cat. Problem biting and scratching is usually either a learned habit or miscommunication, both of which can be corrected over time.

Sometimes, however, sudden unprovoked biting or scratching can be the result of a nervous system disorder or a serious [disease](#). (Note: Any bite or scratch you get from a cat who does not have a current [rabies](#) vaccination should prompt a call to your own doctor; always assume cats have not had rabies shots unless they have a current rabies tag or registration.)

Who taught her the trick? Many kittens learn to use human limbs as toys, climbers, and scratching posts. Many owners are surprised to learn that they are the ones who taught their young cats these bad habits.

Here are some rules to follow:

Never allow or encourage a kitten or cat to play with your bare hand or foot.

Never think you can get around the first rule by wearing protective gloves. There should always be some sort of appropriate cat toy between your limbs and your cat's teeth and claws. A tiny kitten may look cute climbing your pant leg or batting at your thumb, but you'll be singing a different tune when she repeats those behaviors as a full-grown cat.

**Defensive biting and scratching.** Teeth and nails are a cat's primary weapons. If other warnings don't work, cats will bite and scratch to protect themselves. Pay attention to your cat's vocal and body language; she'll usually let you know when she's on the brink of defensive biting or scratching. You don't have to show a cat who's boss by forcing the issue once she's warned you. The best approach is to back off whatever it is she doesn't like or use a safe method of restraint, if it's something that must be done. Likewise, look for warning signals when a cat is aggressive with other cats. If your cat is warning another cat that she's ready to bite or scratch, do not try to touch or restrain either of them. The cats have their attention focused on each other, and the "fight or flight" response is in full readiness. Your touch can actually trigger a fight. Instead, try to distract both cats by stamping your foot, clapping your hands, and shouting "No!" in a sharp, loud tone.

**Unprovoked aggression.** Sudden, unprovoked, and vicious attacks are especially scary. This is not just a cat swatting at your ankles and perhaps causing a little scratch or running your hose. This is send-someone-to-the-emergency-room kind of stuff.

Sometimes, serious biting and scratching is the result of miscommunication: Something startles the cat, and she has the impression that the person or pet nearest her is responsible. Other times, however, there really is something physically wrong with the cat that causes her to actually attack without cause or warning.

If your cat's bites and swats rarely break the skin, they're probably "inhibited" play bites and scratches. A cat who launches a serious attack (with multiple or deep bites, for example) should be carefully examined by a veterinarian.

### **When to Call the Vet**

If your cat is launching serious attacks, especially without warning or provocation, get her in for a thorough veterinary exam as soon as possible. Cats often know when there's something going wrong with them but can't put it into words. The aggression might be a reaction to **pain**, a [hormonal](#) change, or the sign of a problem with her nervous system.

For an EXCELLENT Cat Behaviorist you can also go online to [www.jacksongalaxy.com](http://www.jacksongalaxy.com) where you can find information on individual issues or situations. He also has the show on the Animal Planet Channel "My Cat From Hell" where he is able to eliminate problems with cats.