

# Feline Body Language 101

Our behavior experts interpret common cat poses and sounds.

**I**t was my first evening as a volunteer at a local animal shelter and Sylvester, a jet-black cat, was sitting on my lap. As I gently stroked his back, he purred with contentment. Several feet away Tweety, a yellow canary, was perched safely in her cage.

Suddenly, Sylvester spotted Tweety. His body tensed; the pupils of his eyes dilated. Before I could act, Sylvester leaped to Tweety's cage — front claws gripping the wire mesh for balance. That started a chain of events: the birdcage fell over. Tweety flew out. Sylvester looked, well, slightly dazed. The experienced staff moved in quickly. One grabbed Sylvester and the other rescued Tweety. Fortunately, neither was hurt, and I was wiser.

Seconds later, as I rewound the scene in my mind, it was clear that Sylvester's body language should have clued me in to his intent. But feline cues can be confusing. Many people find cat lingo difficult to read and more subtle to understand than that of dogs. By learning how to interpret feline postures, we can create stronger bonds with our cats while averting misunderstandings and potential aggression.

Through a variety of signals, cats have developed a species-specific way of communicating to other cats and to humans. With the help of experts, we identify — and decipher — nearly a dozen feline body cues and vocalizations.

"Although body language may indicate a cat's mood, not all signs are emitted consciously for the purpose of communication," says



COLLIER SWITZER

**If you're the lucky recipient** of a gentle head butt from your cat, that's a sign that he adores you.

Nicholas Dodman, BVMS, veterinarian and Director of the Animal Behavior Clinic at Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University.

## Tummy display

In general, when your cat rolls over and displays her belly, she feels relaxed. Kittens often initiate this behavior with their littermates when they desire to play. It may also signify trust and vulnerability. Although tempting, do not interpret this as an invitation to stroke your cat's underside. While some felines may permit, or even enjoy such overt attention, others may strike out aggressively and scratch or bite. This situation, like many others, requires

understanding feline etiquette and knowing what your cat prefers.

## Head butting (bunting)

Head bunting or rubbing against another cat or human is a sign of deep affection. It is often accompanied by purring. Rubbing is a way of marking you — with pheromones secreted from glands in the cheek and forehead — as one of the fami-

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## catnriptip

**An agitated cat** will display dilated pupils, arched back and raised hair on the back, and will have a rapid heartbeat.

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**Don't assume that** when your cat shows his belly that he is invited a rubdown. He may just be in a relaxed mood.

ly. In a multi-cat household or colony, it enables cats to have a familiar scent.

### **Kneading**

Kneading, or rhythmically pressing the front paws against feline or human, harkens back to infancy, when kittens performed this repetitive motion with their paws on either side of their mother's nipple to stimulate milk flow. Although kneading can be annoying at times — especially

when your cat digs her claws into your skin — try not to shoo her away. Kneading is a sign of deep affection and trust. But, definitely, keep her claws trimmed on a regular basis.

### **Licking**

As you may have noticed, many of these affectionate displays originate in kittenhood. Adult cats groom their kittens to keep them healthy and well cared for. Cats lick people for similar reasons. It may also be a way of "marking" you as one of their own, especially if you have been handling other cats.

### **Cat blinking**

When cats meet strangers, they usually greet them with an unblinking stare. That signals (1) that the cat is aware of the other's presence and (2) that he has no desire to fight. But would-be aggressive dominant cats also stare at adversaries. In the cat world where felines battle for limited resources, this is an important message. Blinking slowly (more slowly than a human blink) communicates acceptance and great trust. When your cat softly blinks at you, try blinking back. He will appreciate the gesture.

### **Leave me alone or I will get you**

Even the most mild-tempered cat may lash out if he feels threatened or overstimulated by too much play or petting. Claws and teeth can be dangerous, especially to small children, so watch your little ones closely when they are interacting with the family cat, and learn to take these warning signs seriously. While some cats may tolerate being roughed up, a squirming cat with flattened ears and twitching tail is letting its human know — in the only way he can — that he desires to be left alone.

Dr. Dodman, who authored *The Cat Who Cried for Help*, explains that some physiological changes — puffed-up coat, flattened ears, dilated pupils — are autonomic responses to fear or stress. A puffed-up coat makes the cat look larger; flattened

ears are less likely to be damaged during a fight; and larger pupils emit more light into the cat's eyes.

"But other signs," explains Dr. Dodman, "are consciously adopted to ward off unwelcome advances."

In a nutshell, the forward-moving aggressive mode consists of making a beeline towards the cat's adversary, low head, high rump, stretched out tail, transfixed eyes, head moving side to side. A defensive cat is crouched down, low to the ground, with dilated eyes, bushy tail, exposed claws and low growls.

"What people often miss," says Alice Moon-Fanelli, PhD, Clinical Assistant Professor and certified-applied animal behaviorist at Cummings, "is the silence before the storm."

In that nanosecond when the cat is not reacting, he is deciding how to proceed. If two cats head toward each other, stop and stare, accompanied by stillness and body tension, their interaction is not going in a good direction. If individuals could recognize that situation (whether it is human-directed or cat-directed) and distract them calmly, that might prevent all-out aggression.

### **Classic Halloween cat**

A startled cat that is frightened or ready to attack may adopt the classic Halloween posture of arched body, bared teeth, extended claws, hair standing up on end (piloerection) and narrowed eyes fixed on the "offending object." This is a combination offensive and defensive stance. The message is clear, "I'm not playing around!"

### **Twitching tail**

The fast-moving twitch of the end of the tail is an early sign that your cat is starting to get agitated.

"Even before the ears go back, or the cat starts hissing, or piloerection (when their hair stands up), you may notice the tail twitching," says Karen Sueda, DVM, board-certified veterinary behaviorist at the VCA West Los Angeles Animal Hospital.

Active thumping or twitching

### **Additional resources**

For a qualified behaviorist, contact these groups:

- **Tufts Animal Behavior Clinic hotline** at 508-887-4640, or [www.tufts.edu/vet/behavior](http://www.tufts.edu/vet/behavior)
- **Certified-Applied Animal Behaviorists** [www.certifiedanimalbehaviorist.cm](http://www.certifiedanimalbehaviorist.cm).
- **American College of Veterinary Behaviorists** [www.dacvb.org](http://www.dacvb.org)
- **American Veterinary School of Animal Behavior** [www.AVSABonline.org](http://www.AVSABonline.org)





ANTHONY TORRES

**Cats don't need to speak English to convey their demands. Listen carefully, as cats can make more than 20 sounds.**

may indicate the desire to fight, especially in view of other aggressive behaviors. When the tail is bristled or puffed up, it indicates an unpredictable cat that is ready to attack or defend itself.

### The direct stare

While humans love to make eye contact, cats sometimes find this threatening. Ever notice how at social gatherings, cats will gravitate towards those people who are trying to avoid them? In cat lingo, these individuals are only being polite and the cat is attracted to them.

"A blind cat is at a serious disadvantage when it comes to communication because so many signals sent and received by cats are visual," says Dr. Dodman. "The more fearful a cat becomes, the wider its pupils become, helping the cat to acquire as much visual data as possible. An angry cat, with constricted pupils, is ready to fight. But remember, when observing your cat, look at the body language as a whole to properly gauge its moods. Interpreting any single one variable — face, posture or tail — in isolation can be misleading."

For example, although dilated pupils might mean that your cat is

## Lap kitty tips

While it is very comforting to have your cat cuddle on your lap, some felines are by their very nature more aloof than others.

"If your cat was raised without human company for the first seven weeks of its life, he may never be totally comfortable with people and the best you may expect are fleeting visits and brief petting opportunities," says Nicholas Dodman, BVMS, veterinarian and Animal Behavior Clinic director at Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University.

But cats have multiple ways of showing affection to their humans and lap sitting is only one. That said, if you have both time and patience (it may take up to one year), try the following to get your reluctant cat to sit with you.

- Sit in a large room with the cat.
- Arm yourself with treats that your cat finds irresistible.
- Toss a treat in the cat's direction.
- Repeat until the cat is standing by your side.
- Gradually move your hand to your lap and release the treat when the cat's paws are on your lap.

Remember, whatever you do must be on the cat's terms. Never force the issue. If you are lucky enough to lure your cat onto your lap, do not restrain her in any way. She should be allowed to hop off and on at her pleasure.

I tried this exercise with Dill, my shy-but-affectionate 11-year-old Siamese mix. Although we have miles to go (after one week's time), it has been a huge bonding experience for both of us, and that is reward enough. Now when I jiggle her salmon treats and call out "Dill," she comes trotting in, tail held high — filled with great expectation.

— By Adriane Bishko

becoming agitated, it may also indicate fear, or simply that your cat's eyes are adjusting to low light.

### Flattened ears

Cats have extraordinary ears. With 32 muscles controlling the outer ear, they can rotate them 180 degrees, move them up and down, or swivel them independently of each other. The more anxious or fearful a cat is, the flatter the ears become until they lie flat against the skull.

### Vocalizations

When living with a cat, it is important to become familiar with the nuances of feline vocabulary, so you can detect the difference between a plaintive plea for dinner and ready-to-attack mode. Some distressed vocalizations consist of hissing: a

snake-like sound warning you to stay away; growling, a low-pitched rumbling sound, meant as a warning before aggression erupts; and spitting, a sudden, violent non-vocal sound that is more emphatic than growling.

Feline aggression can be a serious problem because it is complex to diagnose and tricky to treat. If you think your cat's behavior warrants advice from a professional, talk to your veterinarian first. He or she can rule out potential physical problems and direct you to a qualified behaviorist. As a general rule, look for veterinarians with a residency or specialty in animal behavior. If you opt for a non-veterinarian, warns Dr. Sueda, choose an individual whose expertise is cats. A dog trainer won't do the trick. 🐾