

Feline Fundamentals – Behavior, Body Language & Communication Webinar Script

Hi. I'm Alana Stevenson. I've been professionally helping people resolve cat behavior problems since 2004. This webinar is on how cats communicate with each other and with people. I will go over feline body language so you can understand cats better and will address three common behavior problems that people often struggle with — failure to use a litter box, play-biting or play-aggression and furniture scratching.

First, let's address the stigmas and stereotypes associated with cats. Cats are often called untrainable, aloof, independent, antisocial and finicky and contrary. There's the expression 'cats have staff.' Then, there's also the expression 'scaredy cat' and often derogatory comments used to describe people who like cats such as 'crazy cat lady.' We tend not to have these same expressions or associations with dogs or people who like dogs.

One of the reasons for this is, unlike dogs, cats are not 'group' or communal animals. All group animals, whether it's a flock of birds, a herd of cows or a school of fish have developed many ways to communicate with each other to keep that group intact. Group animals, like people, are communal. Our interactions and body language are based on cooperation.

It's often called a dog eat dog world, but dogs are very placating creatures. Dogs are very cooperative. They eat together, sleep together, and go potty together. Dogs look to you and to each other for guidance. Our group-based behavior is influenced by and dependent upon the behavior and actions of others and so are our communication skills. This is characteristic for all group creatures. As group animals, we mimic each other and copy each other. We'll placate and appease each other. We follow the lead of others and we look to others and to each other for reassurance.

Cats are less communal. This does not mean that cats do not like companionship or are antisocial, but because cats are not inherently pack or group animals, they are less influenced by the behaviors and actions of others. They have less need for cooperation or to appease. This means they have little need for deference. They're less inclined to mimic each other or to look to others for behavioral cues. There is little need to placate.

This means cats have far fewer social skills and less behavioral ways to deal with conflict. For instance, if dogs are in a dog park and one dog runs the fence, the other dogs will do so as well. Hounding is a horrible sport, but dogs will work together to take down one animal. People can behave the same way, as well. They work as a group to target one individual.

If you think of a bunch of cats trying to hunt the same mouse, it's not going to work very well. A group of cats trying to hunt the same mouse will simply interfere with each other. This is why you can herd cows. You can herd sheep and you can herd people, but you can't herd cats.

Since cats have less strategies and ways to diffuse conflict, when a cat gets stressed, they immediately get into a freeze, flee or fight mode. If a cat wants to be close to any individual,

whether a person or another animal, that cat needs to feel safe and actually like that individual or trust them. Being close to others for a cat is a voluntary want. It's a choice and not necessarily an innate need for survival.

Cats do bond with other cats, animals and people. When cats are bonded, they will demonstrate that affection by mutual grooming. This is called allogrooming. They will lick each other, nuzzle each other, sleep together and often play together.

Many cats live together and accept or tolerate each other, but they are not bonded to each other. Because cats can be very selective in their choices of companionship, it's important whenever you can not to separate cats who are bonded to each other.

There is often the term 'feral' used by people in the cat world. I believe this word is overused. A feral cat is a cat who has had no positive humane interactions with people or any handling prior to eight weeks of age. This is different from a stray cat or an abandoned cat. These cats did have owners at some point or people did care for them, but they were either dumped, abandoned or left behind.

Many cats in cities and suburbs are strays, not feral. There is no way to tell if a cat is feral unless you know that cat's history prior to eight weeks of age. You cannot tell if a cat is feral by looking at them, nor can you tell by the cat's initial behavior. Many cats, especially those who are bonded to one or two individuals will act terrified when separated from their owners or when trapped and placed out of their environment. Their behavior will be no different than that of a feral cat.

Unfortunately, stray and feral cats don't fare very well outdoors on their own without being provided veterinary care, shelter, food and water. The average life expectancy for stray and feral cats is three to five years.

Now, let's go over body language. Let's first look at a happy or relaxed cat. A relaxed or content cat's ears will be up and forward and you can see the pinks of their ears. Their eyes will be soft and relaxed and their pupils will be more almond-shaped. Their body will be relaxed and, as you'll see later, their tails will be up in line or away from their body.

Slow blinking is a feline communication signal often given by relaxed and content cats. You may notice your cat slowly blinks at you when she's sleepy or when you speak to her. Slow blinking signals that the cat wants peace, is non-threatening and does not want any conflict. It can be friendly and affectionate. If you softly relax your eyes and with intention slowly blink at your cat, you may see your cat's eyes soften and your cat will blink back.

Slow blinking is an excellent signal to give to fearful cats. Softly look at them. Blink once very slowly and then look away. Convey this peaceful signal to them two to three times to communicate that you are non-threatening and mean them no harm.

These three images show cats who are fearful. Whereas content, happy cats have their ears up and forward, fearful cats will have their ears back and flattened against their head.

The cat who hisses, lunges or growls but has his ears flattened tightly to his head is a frightened cat. When a cat is fearful, their pupils will dilate. They'll be hunched or crouched and their tail will be tucked underneath them or wrapped around their body.

You may have noticed that your cat's ears twist. Cat's ears are mobile so they can move their ears towards and away from sounds. They can also twist both ears when they are annoyed or peeved, during play aggression and when offensive or antagonistic. A cat's ears will twist when they grab onto a bunny-kicking toy. These are soft toys that a cat will grab and hold onto and then kick with both back legs. You may also see a cat's ears twist when they are mildly irritated. Many young, restless or bored cats will twist their ears regularly. These cats want to hunt or have excess displaced energy.

If a cat does not like strangers, she may sniff the stranger, but when that person reaches out to pet her, her ears may twist backwards. If you see this, there is a very good chance the cat will swat at them, if they continue to try to pet her.

Tails are very expressive in cats. When a cat is relaxed, happy, confident or excited, their tails will be straight up vertically behind them. You will see the cat's tail raise in anticipation or excitement. It is a social signal indicating that the cat wants to interact or engage. You may see your cat's tail raise when it's feeding time or when they come to greet you.

If the cat's tail is in line with their body, usually they're in transition or going from one location to another. You may see a cat wandering outside and their tail will be softly draped behind them. Your cat's tail will likely be in this position when your cat goes to get a drink of water, uses a litter pan or walks from one room into another.

Just as twisted ears can indicate indecision or irritation, a twitching or flicking tail can mean that the cat is hesitant, uncomfortable, annoyed, irritated or excited. There is an expression that a cat's tail is indecisively twitched and aggressively wagged. If a cat is uncomfortable or hesitant, you may see the tip of her tail flick or twitch. This indicates that something is amiss but the cat is not going to do anything about it yet or is unsure of what action to take. You'll see the cat's tail wag while hunting, during play and before pouncing or jumping playfully on another cat.

The tails of many young cats, especially if the cats are bored and restless, swish back and forth regularly. These cats often have excess energy and usually want to hunt, explore or play. Cats also use their tails for balance. The tail of a cat with poor eyesight may swish back and forth more often than the tail of a cat with perfect vision.

In this video, the cat is hesitant to go downstairs to eat because of the white cat on the first floor. This cat has been regularly chased by the white one. In the second video, the cat is outside on a harness and her tail wags when she spots a small animal.

In the first video, this cat sees a chipmunk outside on the windowsill. In the second video, the white cat stalks and then playfully chases the black one.

There is a position that I call the breadloaf position. These cats have their feet and legs tucked underneath them and they face forward, but they're huddled and low to the ground. Often their tails are wrapped around them. A cat in this position is not quite comfortable and relaxed. The cat may simply be waiting for something or they might be socially isolating themselves. You'll see cats in this position when they're cold or when they are lying on hard surfaces. If you place a soft fleece throw down for them, you'll see that they will then curl up and their bodies will relax. You may also see cats in this position when they are uncomfortable or in pain as in the upper right and bottom two lower right photos.

The cat in the upper left photo is a cat who was attacked by another cat in the home at the time of this picture. She was enclosed in a room, but she knew that the other cat was on the opposite side of the door. The cat in the lower left photo is uncomfortable and aggressive to strangers. This photo was taken by the pet sitter when she came into the home. To the right, the two black cats were recently introduced to the white and black resident cat who is in the middle of the photo. She did not like the two new cats. The cat near the door wanted to go into the bedroom but had to pass the white and black cat to do so.

Since many of you may volunteer at shelters or work in rescue, let's take a look at fearful cats again. As mentioned previously, a fearful cat will be crouched or have an arched back. They may be leaning away from what they're fearful of or trying to make themselves smaller. Their ears may be flattened and their pupils will be dilated.

A frightened cat who does not want conflict will look away and avoid eye contact. Their tail will be tucked tightly underneath them or wrapped around them. Their paws may sweat and they will shed excessively.

Fearful cats are often misunderstood and frequently viewed as mean or aggressive, but simple environmental modifications and the use of towels can make frightened cats feel safer and more comfortable. Fearful cats who freeze, cower, make themselves small, avoid eye contact or try to hide want to be and feel hidden. They will prefer to face away from you when you handle them. They will usually be calmer when a towel is placed gently over their head. If they are in carriers, let them remain where they are in the carrier as you examine them.

Cats in cages who are huddled in a corner will feel better having a box or dome to hide in. In shelters, often you'll see these cats try to hide in their litter boxes. Frightened cats will also feel calmer when towels are draped over their cages or carriers.

Other signs of stress in cats will be lip licking and growling or yowling while directly staring. When cats are stressed, you may see them nervously lick their lips. As they become more upset, they may growl or yowl. If you see the cat get puffy or when their hair stands upright, this is a physiological response called piloerection. It's similar to when our hair stands up at the back of our neck.

The white cat to the left is startled or spooked. The cat in the lower left photo feels threatened and is aggressive to strangers or guests who enter the home. His ears are flattened and his pupils are dilated, but he is not getting small or leaning backwards. Instead, he makes direct eye

contact. He'll lunge at strangers if they get close to him or within his personal space. He may also follow and lunge at strangers when they look at him directly or stare at him.

Hissing is an often misunderstood behavior. Hissing is defensive and a signal that the cat feels threatened. The cat who hisses feels like the victim. A hissing cat may not be aggressive. Many cats who hiss will try to avoid conflict or retreat if pursued or challenged.

There are many things that can make a cat fearful. Cats have an incredible sense of hearing compared to humans and can hear sounds well above our hearing range. Loud and sudden noises can be extremely startling to them. What we may think of as normal conversation to many cats may sound like yelling. This is why many cats feel more comfortable with people who are quieter and who walk softly. Loud clanging and reflection of metal cages, strange people and voices, rough handling and being stared at, feeling trapped or confined and barking dogs can all frighten a cat.

Music can affect cats. A study on how music affected cats under general anesthesia was published in the Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery. The study showed that music affects the cat's autonomic nervous system. Classical music decreased pupil diameter and respiratory rate while both pop and heavy metal increased pupil diameter and respiratory rate, which indicates stress. The cat's pupil diameter and respiratory rates were highest with heavy metal.

This is important for those who work with cats at shelters, in clinics or at boarding facilities. Although we may like rock and pop music to keep us going, this music for cats can add to their stress. Keeping a station on light classical music, strings, or a Zen type instrumental will create a soothing atmosphere which can be calming for both people and cats.

The environment is important for cats. One thing cats like to do is climb, especially when they're young and agile. Being higher up also gives them a better vantage point. Cats like to position themselves and use resources where they have a nice view. They want to be able to see all entries and exits of a room. This is why cats naturally position themselves on stairwells and in hallways. It's why your cat wants to be on your kitchen island or on the kitchen or dining room table.

Because view is so important for cats, if you have a large cat tower and it is stuck in a corner so your cat cannot see the entries of the room, your cat likely won't use it. Try moving the cat tree to a more desirable location.

Although cats can jump up and leap down from high surfaces, they prefer to walk up and walk down, so be sure to provide your cats with intermediate platforms to get on and off of higher surfaces.

Cats are nibblers. They eat 10 to 20 small meals per day. Most cats will self-regulate when they are free fed. This means that food is left out for them to nibble at will. Cats who are put on restricted diets or fed very small portions and regimented meals can be more aggressive and agitated than cats who are free fed. Significant meal restriction and intense hunger can increase play aggression, petting aggression and inter-cat aggression.

If your cat is jumping up on the counter and raiding the bread basket or stealing food from the table, your cat may simply need to eat more. Because hunger can increase inter-cat conflict, if you have multiple cats, make sure to have multiple bowls, especially when feeding meals such as wet food. Have one plate or bowl for each cat.

Many cats don't drink enough water. Cats prefer to drink in locations away from where they eat. This is often why cats will drink from the sink, bathtub or your drinking glass. The best placement for water bowls are near where your cat sleeps and socializes. For instance, if your cat has a favorite perch or sleeping spot in the living room, place a large water bowl nearby.

The best water bowls for cats are wide-mouthed ceramic or glass soup or serving bowls. Many cats like running water so large fountains can be enjoyable for them. If you keep food and water in the same room, don't keep the bowls right next to each other. Instead, put a little distance between them and keep water bowls away from litter pans.

Litter box problems are very common. It's important to always rule out medical conditions if your cat does not use the litter box. Failure to use the litter box often has something to do with the size or style of the boxes, cleanliness of the boxes or where they are located.

If your cat is not using the litter box, it's important to assess the following:

Size of the box. The general rule is the larger the better. There are two common styles for boxes, open versus covered. An open box is usually preferred over a covered one. This is because cats have more room to turn around in an open box and they also have a better view of the room when using it.

It's best to avoid domes or high-sided tubs. If a litter box must be high-sided, it should be easy enough for the cat to enter and exit and it should not be so high that it blocks the visual view for the cat.

When it comes to cat litter, cats preferred unscented over scented litters. The preferred litter type for cats is clay or fine sandy litter. Clumping is preferable so that both urine and feces can be removed from the box.

Many cats also like to urinate and defecate in different boxes or separate locations, so it's very important to keep litter boxes clean.

Where we place litter boxes is also important. Do not put the litter box next to food or water or next to sleeping or social areas for the cat. This will deter the cat from using the box or the cat will not want to eat or drink in that location.

The vast majority of litter pan problems are due to litter boxes being too small, too dirty or in poor or vulnerable locations. Location of boxes may also be influenced by other animals or people in the home, especially if there is inter cat conflict or if a cat is sound sensitive or fearful.

The best litter boxes are open shallow sweater boxes. The minimum size should be the length of your cat, plus a few inches, and so that if your cat turns around, all four paws can remain in the box. There should be enough room for your cat to turn around without his or her tail or body bumping into walls or the sides of the box. This may mean you have to position the litter box 6 to 10 inches away from a wall.

If you prefer to have a covered box, make sure the box is as large as possible and that the entry is positioned at the front of the box, not on the top.

The best litter for cats is unscented clay, low dust, clumping litter to remove both urine and feces. The cleaner the box, the better. Ideally, the litter box should be scooped after the cat uses it. Cleanliness becomes more important when there is more than one cat because some cats do not want to share boxes.

Let's look at some of these litter box arrangements. In image one, the litter pan is right next to both food and water. The food, water and litter pan are also located in the basement which makes it harder for the cat to get to. In image two, upper right, the litter pans are large enough for this kitten, but they're side by side and in the same location. One larger litter box would be better for this cat. These litter boxes also have liners. Plastic liners can deter cats from scratching at the litter. In image three, lower left, this litter pan is a tub with a top entry. Not only does it block the visual view for the cat, but there is only one entry or exit point. It is also tricky to get into and it's placed in a corner. The litter box in image four, lower right, is simply too small for most cats. The sides are too high and a cat has to jump into the box to use it.

These three litter boxes are covered and one is a dome styled box. The box in image one is on a platform which makes it more challenging to enter. Since they are covered, they are smaller and more concealed which is appealing for us, but makes them less appealing for the cat. Dome styled boxes, as in image three, can regularly contribute to litter box problems. If a cat feels confined or trapped and the box is challenging to get into, the cat will be less inclined to use it.

In image one, we have a covered box with a top entry. The box is also placed near food and water and positioned next to the cat tower, which was placed in the corner. This cat was not using his litter box. In photo two, the pan was placed in the closet due to multiple roommates and lack of space. It was partially concealed by a door which was blocked by a dresser, which could make a cat feel trapped if someone suddenly entered the room. Crystal litter, although popular, is not a preferred substrate for cats. The cat rarely used the litter box and, instead, used a litter box that was downstairs in a more open area.

We have a similar issue with the box in image one. It is concealed and has a decorative cover, but if you look closer, the decorative cover is over another covered box. This box is too small for most adult cats. It is also positioned in the corner and there is one entry and exit point. In image two, these two litter boxes were located in the basement. They were next to each other and flush to a wall. They were also not cleaned regularly and were quite dirty. Because the boxes weren't cleaned, the cats stopped covering their urine. Because the boxes were in the same location, the cats started defecating in another corner of the basement, image three. The cats were separating

the areas for urination and defecation which compounded the problem. When the boxes were too dirty, the cats simply stopped using them.

These litter boxes are better than the previous ones, but there are still some problems. In image one, this is a fluffy cat with a long tail. The cat is standing half in and out of the box. This can indicate that the box is too small or too close to the wall. In image two, upper right, these litter boxes are clean, but they're side by side and flush to the wall. This makes it more awkward for the cat. Separating the boxes or replacing the boxes with one larger one would be a better arrangement. In image three, lower left, the cat is balancing on the edge of the litter pan. This can indicate that the pan is too small, but more importantly that the cat does not like the litter type which is crystal litter. Image four, lower right, shows a better box. It is large or long enough for the cat and it is clean. However, it is flush to the wall which makes it smaller for the cat. An improvement would be to move this litter box six or so inches away from the wall.

Play biting and play aggression is another common feline behavior problem. This usually occurs in young cats or cats who are left alone all day while people are at work. If cats are not played with enough and in a way that mimics hunting, they will attack people's body parts including hands, feet and ankles.

Unfortunately, the way we play with cats contributes to play biting and aggressive behavior. Many adult cats quickly lose interest when we play with them. One reason for this is that some wand and pole toys for cats are simply too large. Cats go after small animals such as mice, moles and sparrows. In addition, many of us play wildly with cats. We swing the toy at the cat and over the cat's head, but a prey animal does not draw attention to itself, nor does it try to get the cat's attention. Prey never goes towards the cat, nor does it chase or taunt the cat, which is what we tend to do when we play with cats.

When cats hunt, they wait and ambush. Cats try not to be noticed. Prey animals quiver. They are small and make tiny movements. A sparrow may be pecking for food or a chipmunk may be searching for nuts or seeds. A cat will wait over a mole hole for 30 minutes without moving, waiting for the opportunity to pounce.

The mentally stimulating part of hunting for the cat is stalking. Prey does not notice the cat. If a prey animal becomes aware of the cat, that animal will freeze or immediately hide or fly away. A chipmunk might go into a hole or hide under a rock until the cat gives up and loses interest. Prey goes away from the cat and does not chase the kitty.

Instead of thinking of play as swinging the toy towards your cat or moving it over your cat's head, rethink play as a game of 'hide the critter' or 'hide and seek.' The toy should move away from the cat and hide from the cat. The cat has to wait, watch, stalk and pounce on the toy. After the toy is caught, keep the toy still for a moment. Then hide it or move it away from your cat again. End play with your cat catching the toy and then give your cat some treats or food.

A creative way to play is to create a small obstacle course. Throw some pillows, boxes or other items on the floor and with a long pole toy, drag the string around, behind and under the objects. Keep the string partially hidden. When the cat pounces on the string, move it underneath or

behind another pillow and hide it from the cat again. You can make a toy hop into a tote bag or scurry behind the sofa. If you're playing style mimics hunting behavior, it will be more interesting to your cat. By playing in a way that interests cats, play biting and play aggression can be lessened significantly.

If your cat does bite you or grab onto your hand, be passive and go limp. Try not to move. Be boring. If your cat grabs onto your ankles as you walk, stop moving. If you are sitting and your cat bites your feet, tuck them underneath you or cover them with a blanket. Passively remove yourself and look away from your cat or redirect your cat to a pole or a string toy instead.

Scratching for cats is a social behavior. Cats scratch in the presence of others and tend to scratch when they feel good. It is healthy for them. Cats will scratch in anticipation of something they look forward to. You may wake up and your cat scratches as you say 'good morning' or your cat will scratch before play and at mealtime. Your cat may scratch upon waking up from a nap or on greetings such as when you come home from work.

Cats are also attracted to textured surfaces and any visual scratch marks encourage the cat to scratch there again. Since scratching is a social behavior, where the cat chooses to scratch should have social relevance. This is one reason why sofas and chairs are regularly scratched on. They are also large, sturdy and in good locations where the cat can see entryways and exits.

Most scratching posts we buy are far too small, short, narrow and light for adult cats. They may tip when the cat uses them and they move too easily. The middle scratching post is a common scratcher sold for cats, but this kitten is already too tall for it. Cats need large and sturdy, textured surfaces to scratch on. The larger, the better. If it is a vertical scratcher, it should be as tall or taller than the cat when the cat stretches. It should also be solid and heavy enough that it can take the cat's weight when the cat pulls against it. For floor scratchers, they should be large enough for the cat to stand or lay down on. Double-wide cardboard scratchers tend to be effective and less expensive than many vertical scratchers.

You can also throw a Berber rug or sisal type carpet on the floor for the cat. Rugs or carpet can be attached to walls, posts and doors. A preventative measure for deterring cats from scratching furniture is to purchase furniture that is made of smooth fabric such as microsuede. Microsuede is a cat friendly material and is not a desired substrate for cats to scratch on. For wood that has been scratched, sand the wood and add stain to remove any scratch marks. For furniture that's frayed, get small scissors and trim all the frayed edges. Place all scratching posts and pads in locations that have a nice view and that are socially relevant to your cat such as in living rooms or near feeding, sleeping or play areas.

Thank you for taking this webinar. If you want to learn more about feline behavior and handling, take my webinars, Feline Fundamentals Humane Handling Basics 1 and Humane Handling Basics 2, available at the link provided. If you would like to reach out, you can contact me through my website and by email.