

Feline Behavior 101: the WHY behind behavior

A QUICK START GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING YOUR KITTY
THROUGH GENETICS, EXPERIENCES, and CIRCUMSTANCES

1 GENETICS



It is important to understand what behaviors are innate to all kitties so that we can help them meet their physical and emotional needs.

Behavior is a combination of inherited things (Genetics), things that are learned (Experiences), and kitty's environment (Circumstances). All cats display innate behaviors from their genetic architecture. These are behaviors and reactions to stimuli that are coded directly in their DNA. These are behaviors like scratching, hunting, jumping, and hiding. We know that innate behaviors cannot be eradicated, but they can be redirected in ways that allow cats to fulfill their natural desires in appropriate ways.

It is important to understand these behaviors so we can allow our kitties to live enriched and happy lives.

SOCIALIZATION and HIERARCHY - A cat's social structure is also embedded in their DNA. They have the flexibility to live solitary lives or create groups among other cats with dominant members. Humans do not factor into a cat's social hierarchy, but we can become a preferred associate in a cat's life. We can do this by earning their trust and proving that we bring benefits to the relationship. So as cats became domesticated, they became more social with humans over time. However, if this learned behavior is not nurtured, your kitty will either not fully realize a behavior, or it will take longer to manifest that behavior. Therefore, if a kitten is not socialized with humans when they are young (ideally between 0-12 weeks old), different techniques must be used to encourage them to build trust with humans. Community and feral cats may have had little or no socialization with people during this time when their central nervous system is maturing, so unfamiliar things (like humans) are automatically categorized as "unknown" and can be associated with danger. See our handout on Socialization for more information and tips.

HIDING is a natural behavior for kitties. Cats are ambush predators, so they love to hide when they hunt their prey. They also hide as a safety tactic when they are being hunted. Since cats are also territorial animals, they do not take kindly to changes in environment. So, if you move houses or your kitty moves into a new space from a shelter to their new forever home, they will likely hide immediately upon arrival. This is a natural behavior for them to seek safety when they have a change in their environment or enter a new territory. Being tucked away from prying eyes makes them feel safe and in control of their environment, as they would be in the wild. It is best to give kitties "good hiding spots" like covered beds, crates, condos, or cat cubbies and remove "bad hiding spots" like closets, under the bed, or other inaccessible spots that make it difficult to interact with them.

SCRATCHING is a way for kitties to shed dull claw sheaths, stretch their muscles, and deposit their scent through the glands on their pads. Make sure to have a few options of scratching pads and posts available for your kitty to try and see what they like best. If you give kitty a "good" spot to scratch, they will not feel the need to shred your couch or clothing. Double-sided furniture tape is a great deterrent to protect places you don't want kitty to scratch, as they hate feeling anything stick to their paws! Foil is also a good way to keep kitty from scratching.

JUMPING is another exercise all kitties love doing. If you want to keep a kitty from jumping on a counter or furniture, you can use the same double-sided tape, foil, or audible deterrents like SSSCAT that projects a poof of air to keep kitty away.

NIPPING and BITING are easily controlled by redirecting the behavior. If a kitty tries to bite your hands, have a soft toy ready to put in front of them to bite instead. Use rewards to encourage the desired behavior. *See our handout on Nipping and Biting for more info.*

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All cats have their own distinct personalities. Rescue kitties often come to us with an unknown or incomplete history. Because we might not know their entire past, we will use our interspecies communication superpowers to get to know them. Some are naturally more timid, dependent, boisterous, or nomadic. Learning their individual traits helps us better understand them and how to enrich their lives and ours! Kitties in need of socialization are even more special since we must earn their trust and love. Genetics, experiences, and circumstance all form behaviors in cats. This means our kitty's current behavior is consolidated from their DNA, their past experiences, and their current environment. We can focus on new enriching experiences to create a strong bond with our kitties and help them overcome past traumas, fears, or anxiety in our kitties.

The proper trust-building activities give our kitties confidence and assure them we are a positive part of their environment.

2 EXPERIENCES



Past experiences may drive fear, anxiety, and stress in our kitties. The more we understand how they communicate with us, the better we can help them work through stress. The more we uncover things that motivate them, and recognize the barriers they have for interaction, the more quickly we can start to build trust and fill their world with positive experiences and love.

A cat's human families must earn their trust as social partners - which is very different than how we build relationships with dogs. Since cats do not consider humans part of their hierarchy, they do not respond well to people that try to dominate them. Do you wonder why a cat always gravitates towards a person that is aloof vs. the one that tries to pet them and grab their attention? It is because a cat's social framework is hard-coded to apply ONLY to cats. A cat does not have an innate need for humans, so it is up to us to show them that we offer something that is enjoyable to them such as love and attention, food, playtime, or companionship to earn their trust. This is especially true with cats that need socialization. Their shyness toward people can be the result of no contact with humans as kittens, trauma, or their environment. If we exercise our cat-detective superpowers to help decide the best way to build trust, we can counter-condition or desensitize these negative stimuli. The more your kitty is allowed to create a relationship on their own terms, the better they will respond to you and start to build trust. Read their behaviors and let them lead! Your goal is to have them WANT to approach you. Due to a cat's excellent memory, it takes just one agonizing experience in a cat's life to create a deeply rooted and long-lasting fear and aversion. That does not mean it is impossible to recondition, but it takes time, patience, and understanding to make progress and build trust.

New positive experiences for a cat can be stored and recalled quickly, especially when associated with rewards such as attention, food, and play. Once your kitty recognizes that you bring perks to your shared union, a strong and loving bond can start to be established. Building trust is the foundation to start socialization, but it's even more important with cats beyond the kitten stage that have had no human interaction or have had previous negative experiences with people.

Discover what motivates your kitty and use this to show them that you bring good stuff to the relationship.

See our brochure on Socialization to learn more about Verbal and Non-verbal language of cats to better understand how they communicate.

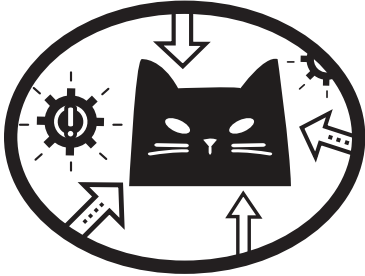
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Circumstances are factors that influence a cat's physical space and emotional reactions. All animals have natural behaviors and needs. To be healthy and happy, they must have opportunities to express those natural behaviors in appropriate ways. Meeting your cat's emotional and physical needs helps her to lead a fulfilling life and have fewer unwanted behaviors.

First, we can create environmental conditions that help our kitties to feel physically safe. There are many factors we can control. Environmental enrichment is the key to making your kitty comfortable and confident. Ensure them that you are a good part of their world by supplying their basic needs. This will allow them to have more natural curiosity and less anxiety about their surroundings. Secondly, we can create emotionally enriching settings for our kitties' mental well-being. Emotional enrichment is a great way to combat the fear, anxiety, and stress a cat may be feeling. Even well-socialized kittens that have had a stable environment and mostly positive experiences, can be influenced by negative circumstances that in turn, create unwanted behaviors. Giving our kitties mental stimulation helps to spend energy in a good way and it creates a stronger bond that brings joy and trust to the entire household.

3 CIRCUMSTANCES



Physical and Emotional Enrichment tactics both play a huge part in making your kitty feel comfortable in their new home. The key here is to read their behaviors to see what kinds of things they like and what they don't. We can then leverage the good stuff and minimize the bad stuff to help them get settled.

THE BASICS -- Give one kitty at least one litterbox, but two if you are able. The general rule is # of cats +1 litterbox. So 1 cat = 2 boxes. Provide fresh water and timed feedings to start to help build a routine. Give kitty a sturdy scratching post to claw and stretch their legs and back. Provide a safe sleeping areas that make kitty feel protected. In the beginning, this mat be a crate, covered bed, condo or cubby where your kitty can retreat and feel protected but not be inaccessible or completely hidden.

ENRICHMENT:

TOYS! Choose toys that help your kitty exercise their instinctual predatory behaviors in appropriate ways:

NOISE MAKERS & SHAKERS – toys that squeak, chirp, vibrate, roll, etc. that kitty can chase.

SENSORY STIMULATION TOYS like feathers, jute, catnip, silver vine, etc. that can spark excitement and play.

INTERACTIVE TOYS like laser lights, cat dancers, and concealed motion toys are great ways for kitty to "hunt".

SELF PLAY toys like door hangers, cardboard boxes, wadded balls of foil, etc give hours of solo play fun

FOOD and TREAT PUZZLES also give great mental stimulation and let kitty practice her dexterity skills!

VERTICAL EXPANSION - Offer a few elevated spaces for kitty to survey her territory and enjoy elevation and vertical spaces to expand their territory. These can be in the form of condos or towers, or wall shelves, or window perches.

CATIOS and SUNROOMS - Safe catio enclosures, patios, and sunrooms allow kitty to enjoy the outside world and watch what is happening in her adjacent territories.

PLEASANT SOUNDS - Pet relaxation music and soft talk radio like NPR help to get kitty used to human sounds.

SCENTS -- Cats are twice as sensitive to smells as humans. Here are a few ways to help their scent transition:

PHEROMONES are sprays that mimic the smells cats normally produce from their scent glands.

They can relieve stress and offer a sense of calm to cats. Spritz their room a few times a day.

YOUR SCENT -- Leave a t-shirt or a blanket with your scent in the room so that kitty becomes familiar with you as a consistent and non-threatening addition to their world.