



Module 20: What Feline Actions Mean

- Eating Rituals
- Early Lessons for Kittens
- How Older Cats Change
- Kneading

The methods cats use to communicate are also dependent on their instincts and behaviours. There are some important lessons to learn about feline behaviour that can help you train and live with your cat. Here are some of the most important topics we will be covering in this module:

- Eating Rituals
- Early Lessons for Kittens
- How Older Cats Change
- Kneading
- Burying Faces

What Feline Actions Mean - 4m50s

20.1 Introduction

Typical feline behaviour is what you should expect to see from your cat.



However, we can take this topic a step further in discussing typical behaviours and how your cat learns.

It is not just about how they act but how they will learn from different situations.

For example, the leader in a house of three cats may be the youngest male cat, or it may be the oldest female cat. It depends on who is going to assert themselves the most.

Cats learn from each other and act accordingly. Undesirable behaviour can form due to how a kitten learns from you and other cats in the house. Stubbornness combined with desires will also show up in your cat's personality depending on the situation. Some cats are more stubborn than others, while others learn early on about the pleasures of bribing their owners for as much attention as possible.

Cats will learn best through positive reinforcement in the form of treats, petting, praising and playtime. Reward them immediately within three seconds to help associate the reward with the preceding action.

Avoid unintentionally rewarding undesirable behaviour and reinforcing it. Don't punish the cat or raise your voice. Keep your training style consistent and calm.

20.2 Eating Rituals - How and Why They Differ From Dogs



Cats have an internal ability to tell when they are full, just like humans.

Unlike dogs, cats will stop when they are full. However, many cats like to have a never-ending food bowl as this provides them more comfort than being fed at certain times of the day. Leaving out a

bowl of dry food for most cats is not a problem, unless your cat is unable to ignore food and is also inactive. An active cat can eat more but remain at a healthy weight, compared to an inactive cat that might eat a lot. Your pet food should indicate the amount to feed your cat, as per the feeding instruction on the packaging.

A combination of dry and wet food is best.

The wet food provides the nutrients and water a cat needs, while the dry food just provides nutrients. However, giving your cat a full wet food diet can be excessive and may lack proper amounts of fibre.

A cat that is fed on a meal basis will most likely understand the exact time they should be fed. Your cat might start begging 30 minutes to an hour before, but they know when they are due to be fed. They can also learn where they are meant to eat and go to that spot and wait.

Most cats are fine with social eating, meaning they won't have an issue if you or other pets are around, however, there are also exceptions. Some older cats do not want to be bothered with other cats and the need to defend their bowl. For this reason you need to know whether you have a social cat or one that needs to eat in their own private space.

Younger cats may try to steal another's food, particularly because they are still very active, and most adults allow it to happen. Older cats' instincts are to let their kittens eat and share. Even in the wild, dining is a family affair, which can differ from how dogs eat. As you learned, there is usually a hierarchy among dogs which determines who eats first. With cats there is dominance, but social eating or simple tiredness of defending one's meal can affect whether a cat protects its food.

Kittens that were raised in humane societies, or cats that spent most of their life going from one family to the next, tend to be more territorial with their food. They may growl, hiss, or run off and eat their food.

20.3 Important Early Lessons for Kittens

Kittens need to learn early on that they do not receive everything they could possibly want in life.

It's a hard lesson because many are willing to get into trouble just for a little fun. Your kitten needs to learn where they can eliminate, sleep, eat, and what they are allowed to play with. These lessons can be hard to teach, particularly when it comes to having fun.

The first rule is that you are responsible for what you leave out and within your cat's immeasurable reach. For example, some young kittens enjoy playing with toilet paper. Therefore, leaving the toilet paper out on the roll can be an issue. If you have a stubborn kitten then he/she may never learn the lesson because it is more fun to play and receive "bad" attention than none at all.

Behaviour

What this means is you need to set your behaviour before you bring your kitten home. You need to realise that, no matter what your cat gets into, it is better to ignore them for their bad behaviour than to acknowledge it with any sort of attention or affection.

The toilet paper is about having fun, burning energy and just playing around. You can curb this need to ruin the paper by giving your cat the attention he/she wants in a proper play time setting. This means you have set times you provide your cat with your attention. If you take time out of your day to play with them, pet them and give your cat affection then your cat is less likely to go after those things you do not want them destroying.

Scratching

You also need to give your cat places to scratch.

Scratching is an instinctive behaviour that does not stop with the removal of claws. If your cat has no scratching post, or one they do not care for, they are going to scratch the carpet, chairs, or other furniture.

If you have multiple rooms you allow your pet into you may want to have more than one place to scratch.

Also, if you have a cat that is already declawed, but do not want to declaw the other one, you need to realise that cats learn by example. Your new cat may not understand why you do not treat the declawed cat the same with regards to scratching. Also, help your kitten realise they can scratch in that location.

Litter training

Most kittens are smart with regards to learning about litter boxes. Unless you have a new litter at your residence the chances are that your kitten has already learned what the litter box is for. By smelling the location of the litter boxes, and having enough for each cat you own, you can make certain your cat has a place to go when needed. If an accident occurs or is about to occur you should take your cat to the litter box as soon as you can.

Sleeping arrangements

Since cats sleep about 15 -20 hours a day so where they sleep is very important. They are also most active just before dusk and just before dawn. Although they sleep a lot, they are light sleepers (hence the term 'catnap') and are usually ready to spring into action in a second or two.

Kittens and cats love to sleep with their owners and this need not be a bad idea. But their crepuscular activities may disturb your night's sleep and it may definitely not be a good idea for those who suffer from cat allergies.

If you have just brought home a new kitten, line a box with soft blankets or even a warm water bottle so she feels comfortable. As she gets used to your home, she will decide where to sleep.

If you already have cats living at home, your new kitten should be given a separate place to sleep. Don't force them to sleep together as this may result in territorial battles.

Eating

Eating is also about routine and consistency.

Make certain your kitten knows where the food is, what they are allowed to eat, and feed them in the same location all the time.

If you feed wet food to your kitten then you should do so at the same time each day and in the same spot. Unless you want your cat stealing food or taking food from your plate you should not allow them a taste of your human food. Cats are definitely capable of stealing food or licking a plate when your back is turned. Cats are expert jumpers and have no problem getting onto counters.

Where they are allowed to go

Teaching your cat where they can and cannot go is also a valuable early lesson.

You can do this in a variety of ways. You can use water, put them on the floor when they jump up, or ignore it. However, if you ignore it they may take this as a licence to continue the behaviour. You never want to give them affection or too much attention. A good policy is to take them off the surface and place them on the floor. Ignore their attention seeking. If they get on the counter or surface again, remove them and go back to what you were doing.

Learning their names

Kittens can also learn their names and can also learn sounds you make. For example, you might have gestures and a verbal sound you make to get your cat to come to you. You want to start any obedience training early. Cats are stubborn but they do learn what you want from them. It is whether they will follow through, or ignore you, that matters. If you start at an early age your kitten is more likely to come when you call their name, make a certain sound with a gesture, or even to walk on a lead.

Using a lead

Certain cat breeds are happy to go outside on a lead and take a walk, while others flatly refuse the weight of the harness. It is about getting your cat comfortable with a collar, moving up to the harness, and letting your cat feel the weight of the lead. Just like a dog, you want your cat to get used to the harness and lead, then train them that you are attached to it. This way when you want your cat to turn, go straight, or slow down, they understand the different movements you make with the lead. Starting early is the best way to get your kitten used to outdoor walks with you.

Riding in a car

In the same vein, you also want to teach your cat to ride in a car comfortably.

At first they may be terrified of the movement and some will be car sick. However, if you start early enough your cat can learn to enjoy the ride.

You want to take your cat around to various locations and not just to the vet. If you only take your cat to the vet, they will not like the car. Additionally, if you take your cat to the vet only for a check-up they are less likely to want to go. You can desensitise your kitten to things like the vet and car

rides, for a more peaceful and less anxiety-ridden trip to the vet.

Suckling

Kittens when separated from their mothers too early can develop the habit of suckling on other things, such as stuffed animals or other soft items. This behaviour will slowly disappear as your cat ages, but for a few weeks or months your kitten may still suckle. Generally they will do so when they are ready for a nap. You may see this behaviour appear again as they age but it will be short lived. For example, on a cold night they may be tempted to cuddle under a blanket, start kneading and butt their head against something soft, making a suckling sound without actually suckling on anything. It is a comfort measure. As long as it is not an obsession through their first year, you won't have anything to worry about.

20.4 Understanding How Older Cats Change



Older cats are not the same as the kittens you have raised.

As you watch your cat progress from kitten to cat you will notice many behavioural changes have occurred. Some of this is due to physical changes such as osteoporosis and arthritis. Your cat can develop both in their lifetime, and often it is based on what they did as a younger cat. For example, a cat without claws that jumped from high places like the tops of cabinets to a concrete or hard floor can develop arthritis. This cat will not want to jump as much, miss the jumps, or position itself several times before actually making the jump. This behaviour is about reward versus no reward.

Your older cat can also start to develop teeth issues such as cavities. This can affect how much dry food your cat is willing to eat. Regular dental cleanings can help with this.

Your older cat can also have medical changes where they become intolerant of certain foods. You might have raised your cat on the same dry food for years, but over time that food started to affect them due to biological changes. Your cat might have developed kidney crystals which make urinating painful. Kidney crystals are a common cat problem across various breeds, and is mostly due to the ash found in most inexpensive cat foods. Constipation can also develop because older cats will need more fibre in their diet.

Your older cat will tell you if something is wrong by being vocal or by being close to you.

For instance, a cat that has an upset stomach or problems eliminating will usually cuddle more with you. They will stay close and want a lot of attention. Once they have vomited or eliminated the problem they will revert to playing happily.

Older cats will play less than they did as kittens. This is due to more sleeping time.

Cats will on average sleep for 15-20 hours a day when they get older.

They will be awake for 20 to 30 minutes at a time, playing, cuddling and grooming. Kittens are often awake for 15 to 20 hours, with 4 hours of sleep, although some may sleep more. It depends on their natural energy level.

For two years kittens and young cats will play a great deal. As they start to hit three years of age you will notice a dip in their energy level. This is perfectly natural. Your cat is maturing. They still want to play but they can relax, lie around and enjoy your attention too.

Older cats around the age of eight years and upwards will start to sleep the most but also have bouts of play time. If you were very active in playing with your cat when they were younger they will still want this time with you. They may even nip you on the ankle or back of your calf if you walk away without playing. This is still play mode behaviour and something that is instinctive. To get other cats to join in play another cat will usually swipe, nip or pounce. Your cat can do this with you as a way to say "Hey, I want to play." The playtime will not last as long and your cat may need a rest in between depending on age, how active they were during play time and other factors.

20.5 Kneading



Kneading is one of the most common behaviours across cat breeds.

Some refer to it as kneading dough or making biscuits.

The motion is all the same. Your cat will rhythmically alternate between their right and left paw, pushing in and out against a soft and pliable object; such as you, a blanket, bed or even the air.

While kneading is common not all cats do it the same way. Some will use all four paws and others will push out their claws while they are kneading.

Kneading starts with kittens.

Before a kitten even walks on its own it will start to knead. A nursing kitten will use its paws in the kneading behaviour. Some scientists believe it is to stimulate milk supply. So why then would an adult cat continue this behaviour past the milk stage? Some researchers believe it is a comforting motion. Your cat feels content and happy, much like they did when getting milk, so when they feel that same emotion, they knead.

Your cat will definitely start to knead if you pet him/her. Often this motion is combined with purring. Some cats will roll over and paw the air in ecstasy while getting a tummy rub and purring. If your cat uses their nails it can be rather uncomfortable for them to knead, but you never want to stop

them as they are certainly showing love. You should just move them and place a soft item between you and your kneading cat.

Kneading is also considered a way for cats to stay limber.

They will work out kinks from a nap by using you or any soft surface to push and pull. It stretches the shoulders and can feel pretty good, so they are ready for the next nap.

Cats will often knead their bedding before they sleep. By kneading they can create a soft bed in a nice little circle. Many mothers about to give birth will knead a comfortable spot to lay down for the forthcoming event.

FACT



Female cats are typically right-pawed while male cats are typically left-pawed

Source: buzzfeed.com

20.6 Burying Faces



Some cats display the behaviour of burying their head into you or a blanket.

This can be left over from when they were very young.

For example, your kitten felt comfortable burying its face against its mother and siblings, so they continue this behaviour as adults. They may bury their head against you, tuck it into your arm, or bury it against a stuffed animal or blanket. You may see this behaviour more when it is cold as a way for your cat to keep its face warm. Your cat may also bury its head in you if it is terrified. This is usually combined with quivering and panicked meows.

Some cats are also natural burrowers meaning they will burrow under blankets to curl up and take a nap. Some find it comforting and relaxing to curl up at your neck, under the blankets, with their face buried in your hair or pillow.

20.7 Burying Faeces

Burying faeces is another behaviour your cat will definitely display.

Whether they eliminate in the proper location or not your cat will definitely cover its own waste. It is a smell thing!

Unlike dogs, that might eat faeces, your cat will want to cover it up and make sure it is disposed of. Some cats may not be as good at burying their waste as others. This can be genetic. There are certain large cats like tigers, lions, jaguars and leopards that use their faeces to mark their territory, so they will avoid burying their faeces. This also means any cat with a similar lineage will be less inclined to bury their waste as a way of marking their territory.

Summary

You have learned a lot about typical feline behaviour, with a few examples.

You should understand that eating rituals are different from dogs because a cat's instincts are quite different. You also learned about kittens and the early lessons you need to teach them to avoid issues as they age.

You have discovered certain medical and behavioural changes that are typical in older cats, as well as an understanding of why cats bury their faeces.

This module also explored the hypotheses surrounding kneading and a little on why cats bury their faces in blankets, you or other cats.

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