

Feline body language

Introduction

Cats use body language (facial expressions, posture, tail and vocalisation) constantly to communicate how they are feeling. Cats do not like direct eye contact and can see this as a challenge since aggressive cats stare at other cats. It is best to look at them indirectly and use long slow blinks as this signifies that you are friendly.

Feline body language can be very subtle and it can often be difficult to understand how they are feeling. Cats have evolved to display subtle signs if they are anxious, painful or scared and will only escalate their behaviours on extreme circumstances i.e. when they are feeling under threat.

Behaviour = communication

It is important to be familiar with how a cat might try and communicate how they are feeling using their face, posture, tail and so on and making a correct assessment of this behaviour can then help you decide how you are going to approach this cat and handle the cat safely.

Recognising when a cat is feeling pain is also very difficult and there is further information on this subject in the Anaesthesia and Analgesia unit.

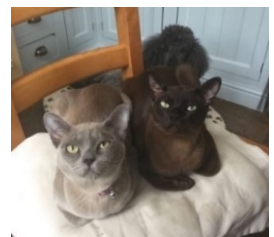
The following common displays of communication by cats can indicate quite specific feelings and sometimes it is easy to confuse different behaviours.



In order for us to be able to handle and treat our feline patients in a safe and fear free manner, a good knowledge of behaviours specific to that particular species is vital.

Facial expression

- Ears up, eyes closed/half-closed, lips up – relaxed
- Ears forward, eyes open, lips down – attentive /anxious
- Ears flat down, whiskers flat along face – fearful
- Ears back and flat, whiskers going forward – defensive / aggressive



Posture

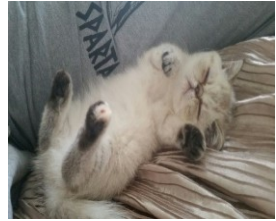
- Standing with hind legs slightly elevated – offensive
- Arched back, hair standing up – ready to react
- Crouched with tail wrapped round body – defensive
- Crouched, rear slightly elevated and moving from side to side – ready to pounce
- Lying on back – defensive (can bite, scratch and bunny-kick)

- Lying on back, rolling from side-to-side – invitation to play



Tail

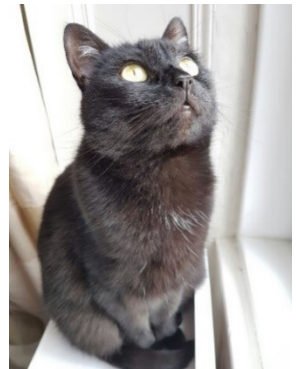
- Tail flicking –mild irritation
- Tail lashing – annoyed
- Tail thumping – frustration



Vocalisation

Closed or almost closed mouth:

- Purr: noise made when content, but may also be made when in pain/distressed.
- Chirp/chirrup: high pitched sound associated with excitement



Open to closed mouth:

- Mew: noise made by kittens to attract attention; gets louder with distress.
- Meow: attention seeking noise, or greeting.
- Chatter: noise often made by cats when watching birds through the window.



Open mouth:

- Growl: low pitched rumbling sound given off as a warning.
- Hiss: another warning sound.
- Spit: may follow a hiss; another warning sound.
- Caterwaul: loud screaming noise usually associated with mating/fighting.



Learning how to 'read' cat body language and understand their natural behaviour can help tremendously in treating them in the clinic and also in advising owners how to best care for their pets.