

Behaviour matters

Nature vs nurture – Nicky Trevorrow looks at what makes your cat a unique individual

We all like to think that our own cat is best and many know what it is like to have a really special cat in our lives – the one that seems to stand out above the others as one of a kind. Cats, just like us, are all unique and this is one of the reasons that we love them so much. Each cat is blessed with their own personality and interesting quirks. A classic example of where this has been well observed in literature is, of course, TS Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. So how do cats get their unique personalities and what factors shape their behaviour? Common questions such as 'why does my cat scratch the furniture?' or 'why is my cat timid?' can benefit from an understanding of these factors which make cats distinctive individuals.



Cats often feel safer if the wall is behind them

when they eat so they can survey their territory

Some cats can spend a lot of time at cat flaps watching out for any intruders



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The big nature verses nurture debate

This debate asks whether behaviour is shaped by either what the cat is born with (known as 'innate' behaviours) or everything that happens after the cat is born and shaped by the environment they live in (called 'acquired' behaviours). Despite the fact that historically professors examining human behaviour have strongly argued a case for either side of this argument, the simple answer is that it is both! Cats are no different and their behaviour is affected by both their genes and the environment.

The African wildcat within

Every cat has an underlying 'blueprint' of what it is to be a cat. When trying to understand why cats do the things they do, it is worth going back to their roots. Cats as a species have a shared ancestry with the African wildcat. For example, many owners wonder why their cat scratches the furniture. It can seem like a pointless act. However, if we consider the African wildcat, we can see that scratching is a method of communication by depositing chemical signals known as 'pheromones' from scent glands between their toes as well as a visual marker from the vertical scratched lines. This behaviour has not changed during the domestication process and is used by our pet cats for the same reason. Scratching is therefore a natural behaviour that cats need to perform and falls under the 'Need to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns' within the Codes of Practice of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 (or relevant jurisdictions) to guide owners and caregivers of their duty of care.



The apple doesn't fall far from the tree

Before kittens are even born, their 'personality' is affected by whether their mother has a stressful pregnancy or not. The kittens are more likely to cope with everyday life if the queen is confident and comfortable in a home setting during pregnancy. Kittens can inherit genetic influences from both their mother and father. Research shows that the trait for how bold or confident a cat is comes from their father. So confident fathers are more likely to sire confident kittens and conversely fearful fathers are more likely to sire fearful kittens.

The drive to survive

Cats are born already able to perform certain behaviours that are necessary in order to survive. 'Rooting' behaviour or wiggling about to find the mother's teat as well as being able to suckle the milk are two examples. Kittens can also start purring within a day or two of birth so that they can quietly communicate to their mother that all is well. The hunting drive is something that is inherent to being a cat, even if some cats don't seem to catch anything. Even a lone orphan kitten can still grow up to be a proficient hunter without any previous experience.

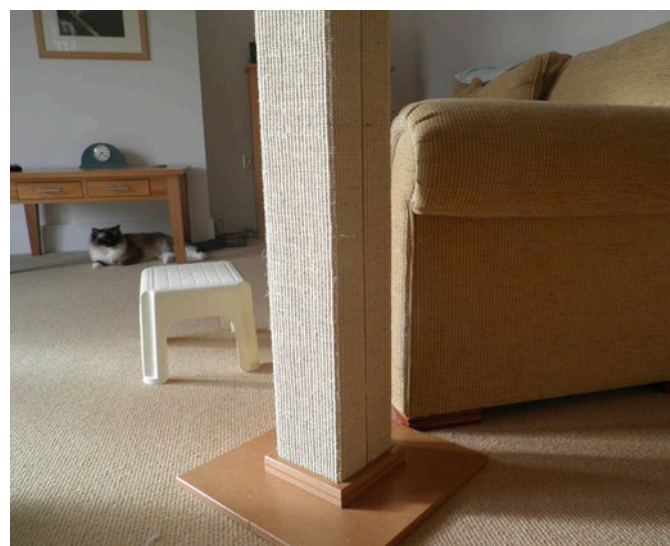
Kittenhood education

The biggest window for learning in a cat's lifetime happens in the very first two months. This is why a good education during kittenhood, known as 'kitten socialisation', is vital to set them up for life and enable them to be a well-rounded cat. During this time, kittens need to be gradually introduced to lots of different people, including children, as well as experience a ▶

▶ variety of different household sights, sounds, smells and textures. It is very important that all experiences are positive for the kitten. For example if young kittens learn that the cat basket is a safe, comfortable bed, which is always available, then as adults, they will be much less stressed by a trip to the vets. Similarly, daily playing of a socialisation CD that features sounds like fireworks will have a huge positive impact on the cat's welfare when they subsequently hear fireworks later in life.

Learned behaviour and previous experience

Just like people, cats are constantly learning throughout their whole lives. What they experience will naturally have an effect on their behaviour including the good, the bad and the ugly! The way in which cats learn is very similar to people and indeed, most species. For a fun look at some of the different ways in which cats learn, check out 'How cats learn' on our YouTube channel <http://bit.ly/CP-YouTube> Your own cat is likely to have their own unique ways of gaining your attention. Miaowing is actually a learned behaviour as feral cats and wild cats rarely vocalise. Humans



A tall, sturdy scratch post with vertical thread is ideal for cats to express their natural behaviour

are quite a chatty species and cats have learned that they get a reaction from their owners when they miaow.

Medical conditions

It is very easy to forget that it is important to always consider a cat's health as this can have a huge impact on their behaviour. If a cat is in pain, they may hide more, be less inclined to interact with their owners and eat or play less and it is these subtle changes in their day to day behaviour that we need to be mindful of. It can be extremely difficult to tell as cats are the masters of disguise and are highly unlikely to limp, despite

owners expecting to see this as a sign of pain. The vets should be the first port of call for any changes in behaviour.

Home sweet home

A cat's home is their castle and it is crucial that it is safe and protected against intruders. It needs to be a place with all of their essential resources such as their food bowl, water bowl, litter tray and beds etc, all spaced out around the home. Equally if there were anything which a cat perceives as threatening in or around their territory, it can affect their behaviour. If there were a neighbourhood cat in the garden, staring at the resident cat through a patio door, this is likely to be very stressful for them.

Overall, a cat's behaviour is affected by a mixture of nature and nurture. When wondering about why a cat may act the way they do, there are a variety of factors to consider. For example, a timid cat may have had a mother that experienced a stressful pregnancy, a fearful father affecting their genetics, little or poor socialisation to people or a scary cat in the neighbourhood. Understanding your cat makes for a happier cat! ●

Even lone orphan cats can grow up to be proficient hunters