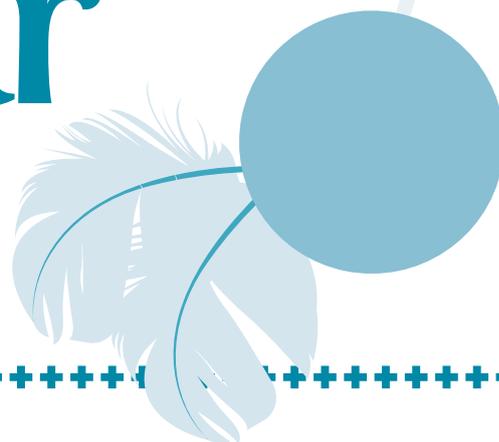


Behaviour matters



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Nicky Trevorrow delves further into understanding the language of cats

How often have you looked at an image of two cats curled up together in an intertwined fashion and thought 'Ahhhh how lovely!?' Let's face it, as cat lovers, I bet that is pretty often! Yet in reality, how often have you seen cats *actually* doing this? We find photos of cats washing each other or curled up together so endearing as this behaviour appeals to our sociable human nature. The question is how do cats really perceive each other? Are they friend or foe?

In the previous issue, part one of *Friend or foe*, we explored feline body language to help us to understand how to 'speak cat'. Now it is time to put that knowledge into practise! As we already know, cats have shared ancestry with the African wildcat so their baseline for behaviour is that of a solitary

nature. This differs to species that need to have company, such as rabbits. Now you may be thinking that your cats seem perfectly happy together, and perhaps they are, however it is often the case that many cats are not as sociable with one another as first thought, especially given how subtle they can be.

Nature and nurture

So what factors affect sociability in cats? It is, unsurprisingly, a mixture of nature and nurture. Genetics can play a role as some cats will naturally be more predisposed to being sociable than others, or will at least tolerate the close proximity of other cats more readily. Certain cat breeds are renowned for either being more sociable or more territorial. Kitten socialisation, while the kittens are between two to seven weeks of age, can make a huge impact on sociability. It is during this window of time that kittens learn what is normal in the world around them, including social responses to people and other species. Even providing the scent of a healthy, friendly, vaccinated cat on a clean cloth regularly during the socialisation period can make a difference.

Cats are more likely to get along if they are related, such as litter mates, although this is not a guarantee. Between 18 months and four years of age, cats go through a period known as 'social maturity'. This differs to sexual maturity (which is from four months of age) and is when they naturally get more independent and can drift apart from one another. Sometimes even well-bonded cats can fall out during this time. Another factor to consider is previous experience with other cats; whether positive or negative, these experiences can affect future interactions with other cats.

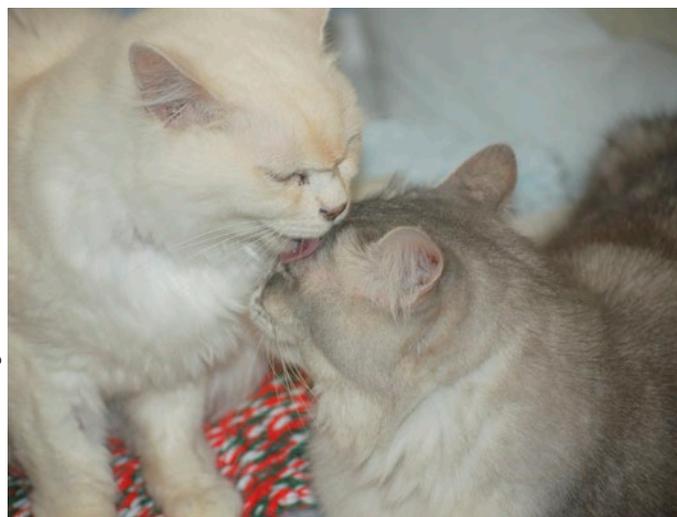


Photo: Gemma Lovegrove

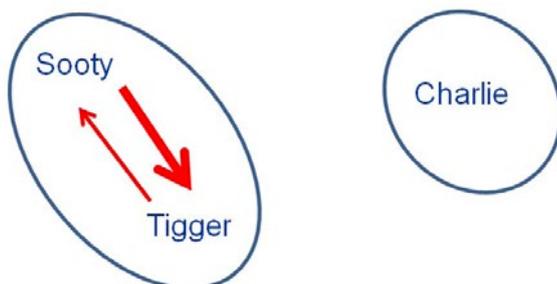
Signs of cats in the same social group

- Mutual grooming (known as 'allogrooming')
- Mutual rubbing (known as 'allorubbing')
- Sleeping together touching, intertwined
- Spending a lot of time in close proximity
- Greeting one another with a tail up and/or touching noses

Many people feel that their cats are friends or in the same social group if they do not see their cats fighting or hissing at one another. But instead of the absence of negative behaviours, we need to look more closely for positive behaviours. Perhaps the absence of positive behaviours could indicate that the cats are merely tolerating one another, which is very common for many cats. In some households, one cat may spend much of their time upstairs, while the other cat tends to reside downstairs. Carefully avoiding one another can help to prevent direct conflict, which could otherwise have led to fighting and potential injury. Other cats may 'time share' a favourite armchair, whereby one cat is found sleeping in the chair in the morning and by the afternoon has disappeared, as the other is using it, almost as if they had a secret rota that we do not know about!

Try doing an 'interaction diagram' for your cats. These are often used by behaviourists to explore feline relationships in more depth. Start by observing the cats and noting their behaviours in a table.

| Example: | Mutual rubbing | Mutual grooming | Sleeping together | Avoids |
|----------|----------------|-----------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Charlie | | | | Sooty & Tigger |
| Sooty | Tigger | Tigger | | Charlie |
| Tigger | Sooty | | | Charlie |



Interaction diagram showing that Sooty and Tigger are in the same social group and Charlie is a separate social group. The thicker arrow from Sooty towards Tigger shows that he likes Tigger more!



Once the number of social groups has been identified, the best way of helping to keep the peace is by providing plenty of essential feline resources; litter trays, food bowls, water bowls, hiding places etc. In an ideal world, one resource per cat plus one extra gives the cats choice. As a minimum though, provide enough resources per social group. If you have one cat living upstairs and another downstairs, then split the resources between the respective areas. It will reduce any competition between the cats as well as reduce the stress of one cat coming downstairs through another cat's territory in order to access food.

Some cats may struggle with sharing their home with other cats. Cats rarely show obvious signs, such as hissing, when they do not get on with another cat in the household. More frequently, they will emotionally block access to resources. This does not mean that they will sit next to a litter tray and physically prevent the other from using it; cats are much more subtle, so it is very easy for these behaviours to go undetected by their owners. Instead they may be sitting on the other side of the room, looking innocent to the owner, but meanwhile sending out negative vibes to the other cat. It is easier to look at the behaviour of the cat wanting to use the litter tray as it is hard to notice the territorial cat doing anything in particular. They may look anxious, or might only use the litter tray once the other cat has gone outside, for example.

Overall, cat relationships can be much more complex than first thought. Sociability varies widely and all cats are individuals. While cats do not *need* friends, they may choose them if they wish, although often they only like specific individual cats rather than being generally sociable to all. By understanding our own cat's needs, we can create a happy, harmonious life for them. ●

For more information about cat body language check out:

- Cats Protection's free e-learning course on cat behaviour – <http://learnonline.cats.org.uk/ufo>
- Cats Protection's leaflet called *Cats living together* and other behavioural leaflets – bit.ly/1ycuV0z