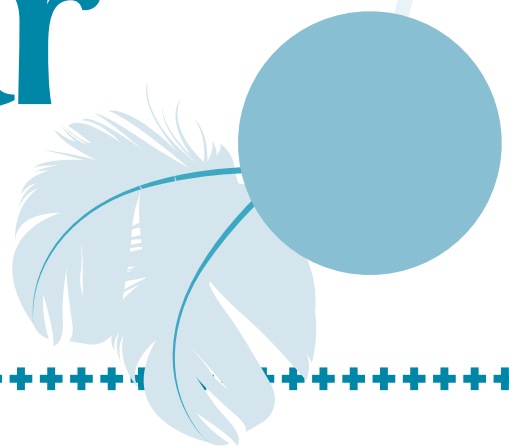


# Behaviour matters



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## Nicky Trevorrow reveals the secret to happy cats

Whether you are just adopting your first cat or you've had cats for decades, there's always something new to learn about them! This is one of reasons that make cats so alluring. Owners would generally agree that they want to do the best for their cats and would like to know how to make them truly happy. The secret to happy cats is to understand them better; not just as an individual but as a species too. We are all familiar with our own cat's little quirks, and by having a deeper understanding of the differences and similarities between individual cats, we can improve our relationship with them.

### The basics

All cats share basic needs. The Code of Practice for the Welfare of Cats or 'Cat Code' under the Animal Welfare Act, 2006 (and relevant jurisdictions) helps to guide owners and caregivers to fulfil their duty of care towards their cats. Originally known as the 'Five Freedoms', which was developed for farm animals, it identified what animals need in order to ensure good welfare. These have since been updated to become the 'Five Welfare Needs', which are as follows.

- The need for a suitable environment
- The need for a suitable diet
- The need to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns
- The need to be housed with, or apart from, other animals
- The need to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease

So, understanding how to meet these needs for our cats is a great place to start. Looking at feline ancestry will help to unravel the mysteries of our beloved moggy and how they came to have these needs. Cats have shared ancestry

with the African wildcat and have changed very little since domestication which occurred about 10,000 years ago. This explains why it is useful to understand African wildcat behaviour in order to understand the underlying 'blueprint' for the domestic cat as a species. For more information about the origins of the cat, go to page 28.

On an individual level, each cat is shaped by both its genetics and its experiences throughout life. From kittenhood right through to the golden oldie years, cats are continuously



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learning. An appreciation of both the physical and behavioural development of kittens can help to explain their behaviours later in life. For example, as a kitten's eyesight continues to improve as does their mobility, they are motivated to play. Kittens are especially playful from about five weeks of age. If kittens play with their litter mates, mother and a variety of suitable, safe kitten toys, they develop into well rounded adult cats. However, if people play with young kittens using games involving fingers or toes, then the kitten learns that this is a normal way to interact with humans. While this is very common and can seem like innocent fun, it becomes more painful as the kitten grows into an adult. Many owners often mistake this inappropriate play behaviour as 'unprovoked, aggressive' behaviour. By understanding kitten development, how cats learn, as well as how to meet a kitten's need to express normal play behaviour, we can prevent behavioural problems happening later on.

## Keen senses

Cats are a remarkably adaptable species. The fact that cats have learned to be vocal with their owners is testament to this. In the wild, cats rarely miaow instead naturally preferring to communicate through scent messages. It can be hard to people to comprehend how important scent is to a cat and how this shapes their perception of the world, when humans are such a visual species. If we arrive home with shopping bags, we may be perplexed by some cats' insistence to sniff the bags. To us, they look just like regular shopping bags that have been seen before. To a cat, they contain lots of different scent profiles picked up from outside and this can potentially change each time.

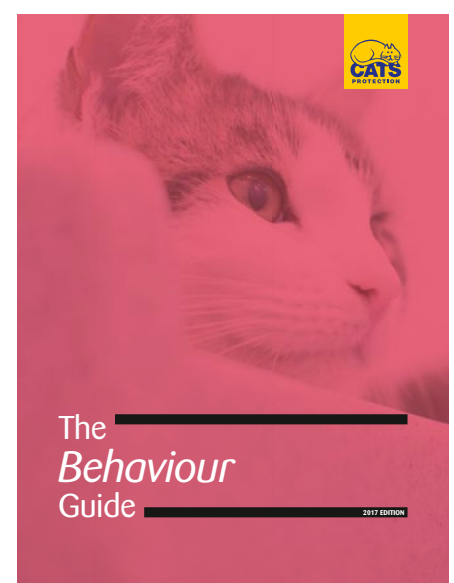
Similarly, cats that are friends and in the same social group have a shared 'group scent', which is a mix of the cats' scents. This is regularly reinforced through mutual rubbing, known as 'allorubbing'. Understanding cat communication, as well as social behaviour, can help owners see things from the cat's perspective in situations such as one cat returning after a prolonged stay at the vets. Unless the cat has been shaved, eg for a surgical procedure, cats generally look the same

to us when they return home. However, to the resident cat, the cat returning smells completely different, often due to scents picked up such as veterinary disinfectants. Understandably, some resident cats may be hostile towards the 'unfamiliar' cat. This is equivalent of a usually clean shaven family member or close friend returning home after a few days with long hair and a beard!

By knowing how to promote normal cat behaviour and recognise the subtle signs of stress or a change in behaviour, we can meet their needs and ensure good cat welfare. Cats deserve more than love (or cupboard love!), they deserve our understanding. Cats Protection has recently produced *The Behaviour Guide*. While it is aimed at CP volunteers, staff and the veterinary profession to enhance cat behaviour knowledge, many of the topics may be useful to owners too. This introductory guide is divided into four main sections:

- promoting normal cat behaviour
- cats behaviour in the rescue environment
- information for new cat owners
- common cat behavioural problems

This guide can be accessed on the CP website, go to [www.cats.org.uk/cat-behaviour](http://www.cats.org.uk/cat-behaviour). Brushing up on our 'cattitude', means we can make our cats happy. ●



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