

FABULOUS FELINES

LESSON 4: Grades 4-6

LEARNING TO SPEAK “CAT”

Show-Me Standards: Academic Goals: 1.2, 1.5, 1.6, 1.7, 1.8, 2.1, 2.3, 3.1, 3.3, 3.5, 4.1
Knowledge Goals: Communication Arts-3, 5, 7; Science-4, 7

Objective: To interpret feline verbal and non-verbal communication and to understand warning signs to avoid cat scratches/bites.

Materials:

- “What is This Cat Telling You?” handout
- “Answer Sheet” handout
- Pencils
- “Reading Your Cat’s Body Language” handout
- Poster Board
- Markers, crayons, or colored pencils

Method: Today we’re going to talk about how cats communicate with us. Learning what cats are “saying” is important. It can help us understand how they are feeling. It can also help us predict their behavior. Your cat is talking all the time. Are you ready to learn this fascinating language?

Ask the children how they let others know what they are thinking or feeling. Usual responses include talking, writing, and sign language. Believe it or not, animals and people have very similar ways of communicating. The two most common ways people and animals communicate is verbally and non-verbally.

Let’s talk about verbal communication first. Humans speak in words, but cats speak in sounds. The average cat can make at least 16 different sounds, including purring, howling, hissing, and meowing. Ask students to imitate each of these sounds. The subtle differences in sound allow the cat to communicate his needs to human companions; he can make commands, as well as requests and complaints. Some sounds are reserved primarily for communication between cats. A cat uses the “hiss” and the “growl” as a warning signal to cats and people to stay away or back off. If you hear this, leave the cat alone or a scratch or bite may follow!

Cats use something called “body language” in conjunction with sound to express themselves fully. People use this, too. For example, if I shrug my shoulders, what does that mean? Choose a few volunteers to demonstrate different emotions that people communicate non-verbally. Act out happy, mad, sad, and surprised without talking. Have the rest of the class guess the emotion.

Felines are experts at non-verbal communication, using their ears, tail, eyes, body posture, and scent glands to “talk.”

Ears: A cat’s ears do more than just hear. The cat’s outer ear, the portion that points up, is the pinna. Cats have 30 muscles in each outer ear. They can rotate this area up to 180 degrees. These muscles allow cats to move their ears in different directions at the same time. The pinna locates and concentrates sounds down into the ear canal. This allows cats to hear even the faintest of squeaks, peeps, or rustling noises. But, the pinna also move according to a cat’s mood. For example, if a cat is interested in the action going on around him, his ears will stand straight and alert.

Tail: The tail is an extension of a cat’s backbone. It helps balance a cat’s body. A cat’s tail can help them climb, walk along a chair back, or tiptoe across tall shelves. The tail also indicates a cat’s moods and thoughts. For example, severely agitated cats will move their tails quickly back and forth, a clear warning signal to leave him

alone. Watch out – if not heeded, this could be followed by a scratch!

Eyes: A cat’s eyes are extraordinary. Cats can see six times better in the dark than humans. They can also use their eyes to express emotion. If the eyes are staring, look out. This is a challenge.

Body posture: The way your cat stands says a lot. If he positions his body low to the ground and starts sneaking around, he’s stalking his prey. Cats love to “catch” toes, toys, and just about anything that moves.

Scent glands: Felines communicate with other cats through scent glands. These special glands located strategically throughout the cat’s body release aromatic markers called pheromones. Cats rub on things and leave their scent behind to help establish and maintain their territory. These glands are found on a cat’s face, shoulders, neck, rump, anal sacs, and toes. Your cat may rub on you to proclaim to all other cats that you belong to him!

Distribute the “What is This Cat Telling You?” handout to each student. As a class or in small groups, look at each cat. Examine and discuss what is happening in each picture. Think about:

1. The cat’s body language - the ears, tail, eyes, and body posture.
2. From the body language, can you guess what sound the cat might make?
3. What is the cat feeling?
4. Is the cat safe to approach, touch, and/or pet? Why or why not?
5. Write a simple sentence under each picture to describe each cat.

After completing the handout, look at the “Answer Sheet.” Are you fluent in “cat?” Find out more from the “Reading Your Cat’s Body Language” sheet. The more you understand something, the more you appreciate it. Cats are wonderful creatures when you get to know them! Take a few minutes every day to talk to your cat!

You really understand cats. To show that you do, write a story from a cat’s point of view. Imagine what a cat would say to you and how he would say it.

Call to Action: Now that your students are expert speakers of “cat” prepare them to teach others the language. Divide the students into groups. Each group will utilize their feline pictures from the “Speaking Cat” handout. After cutting each picture out individually and enlarging it on a copier, paste it on a large piece of poster board. Students may also wish to color them. These are now visual aids. Arrange to visit classrooms for younger students to teach them this fascinating language. Help younger students learn to appreciate cats and keep them safe from scratches and bites by recognizing warning signs.

Related Reading:

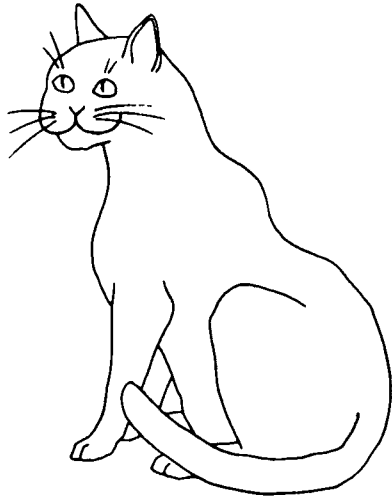
How to Talk to Your Cat, Jean Craighead George, 2000 Harpercollins Juvenile Books

Find out what your cat is really saying – and talk back! Learn through words and photos how to communicate with that ever-lovable animal – the cat. Ages 7 and up.

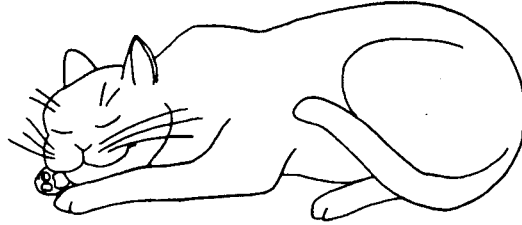
Web sites: For recommended animal-related web sites visit www.apamo.org and choose “Animal Issues” from the left-side menu, then choose “Links” from the top of the page. Or [click here](#) to launch your browser and link directly to the list.

What is This Cat Telling You?

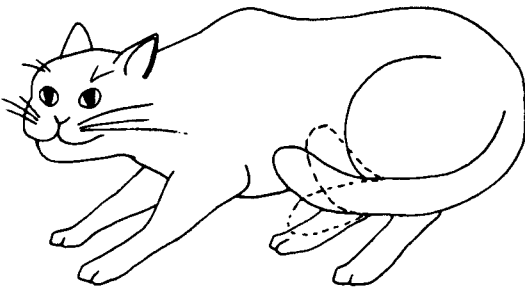
1



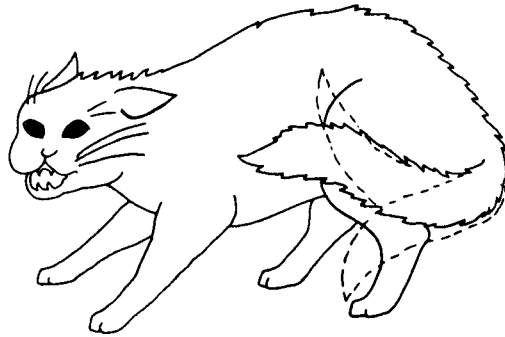
2



3

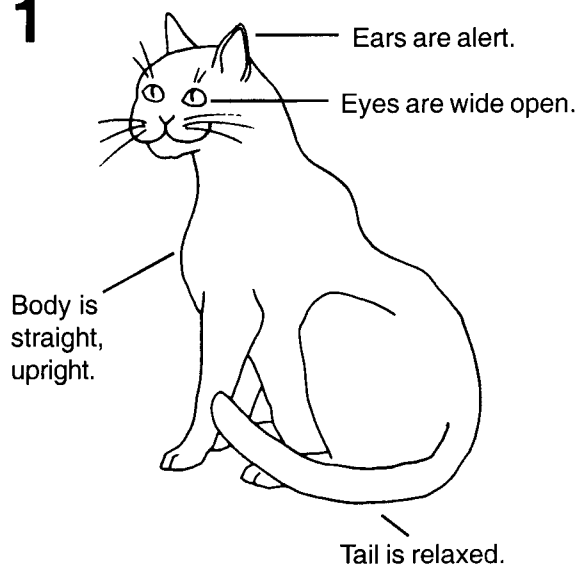


4



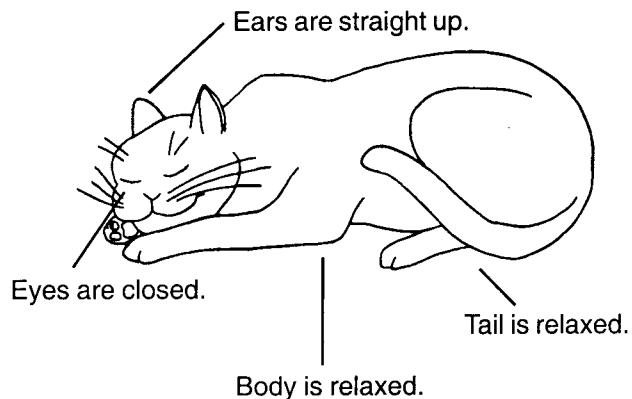
Answer Sheet

1



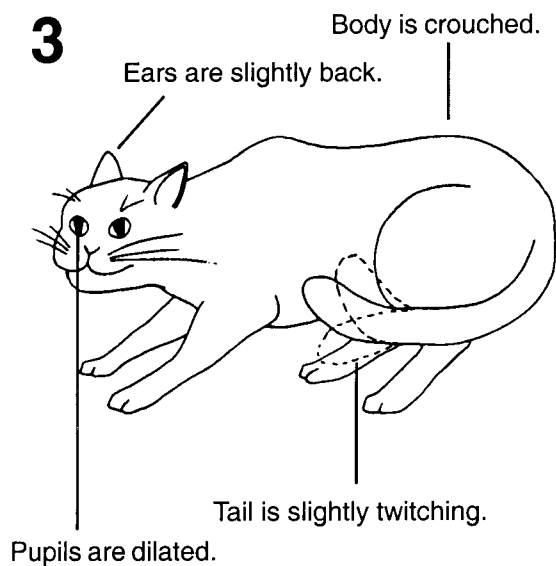
This cat is happy. "I trust you and am ready for attention." A safe cat to pet.

2



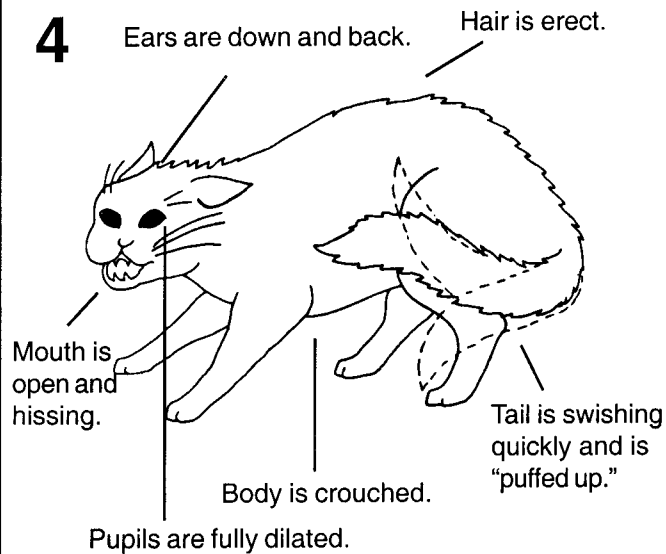
This cat feels safe and happy. Cats must trust you before sleeping in your presence. Don't surprise a sleeping cat.

3



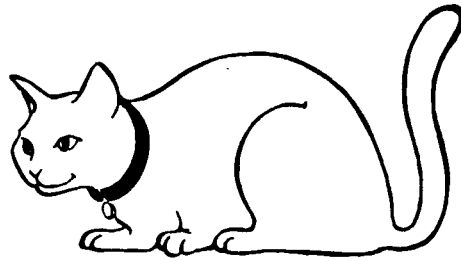
This cat is playful. "Let's have some fun!" He is ready to pounce, so approach with some caution.

4



This cat is ready to defend himself! "Don't touch me or I may bite or scratch!" Leave this cat alone.

READING YOUR CAT'S BODY LANGUAGE



The Tale of the Tail...

- ♥ When the tail is flying high: "I'm happy."
- ♥ When it is at half-mast: "All is not great."
- ♥ When it is dropped low: "I'm unhappy."
- ♥ When it twitches back and forth: "I'm excited or curious."
- ♥ When it swishes rapidly: "I'm annoyed!"
- ♥ When it is puffed up: "I'm angry!"

Tongues Talk...

- ♥ Embarrassment: Rapid, non-stop licking.
- ♥ OK: Short staccato licks looking at you.
- ♥ Boredom: Constant, deep intense licks.
- ♥ Nervousness: Short, shallow licks.
- ♥ Affection: The cat licks you or another cat.

The Ear Story...

- ♥ Ears alert/straight up: Ready for fun or affection.
- ♥ Ears flat out sideways: "What's up?"
- ♥ Ears downward: "I'm excited and playful!"
- ♥ Ears down and back: "I'm upset! Watch out!"

Listen to My Paws...

- ♥ Paw kneading: "I'm content."
- ♥ Paw strokes/hugs: "I love you."
- ♥ Paw nagging: "I want something."
- ♥ Paw blows: "A fight!"

The Eyes Say It...

- ♥ Eyes wide open and looking at you: "I'm listening."
- ♥ Eyes half closed: "I'm sleepy."
- ♥ Eyes dilated/pupils in slits: "I'm feeling alert, playful, confident."
- ♥ Eyes fully dilated/bug-eyed: "I'm angry or scared, so be careful!"
- ♥ Blinking and winking: "I'm talking to you, I like you."
- ♥ Eyes clouded: "I'm ill," or "I'm relaxed."
- ♥ Eyes staring: "Stay away." A stare is a challenge.