



FREE GUIDE

Cat behavior basics

What your cat is actually telling you

Introduction

So much of what gets called a cat 'being difficult' is actually completely normal feline communication that just doesn't match how humans naturally read body language. This guide covers what cats are really saying, why they do the things that confuse people most, and how to work with those instincts instead of against them — based on the AAFP's Feline Behavior Guidelines and International Cat Care's behavior resources.

Reading the body language

Ear position, tail movement, and whisker position are the three most reliable signals. A relaxed, content cat holds ears forward, whiskers loose, and tail loosely wrapped or gently swaying. As a cat becomes anxious, ears start to turn and lower sideways, whiskers splay forward stiffly, and the tail may flick, swish, or tuck low — the faster and more intense the tail movement, the more distressed the cat generally is. Watching for the early, subtle version of these signs (not just the obvious ones like hissing) is what lets you actually prevent a stressed cat from escalating to fear-based aggression.

Kneading and head-bunting aren't quirks — they're affection

Kneading traces back to kittenhood: kittens tread with alternating paws against their mother to stimulate milk flow, and an adult cat kneading you is showing that same comfort and trust. Head-bunting (pressing their head or cheek against you) is a genuine social gesture — cats bunt the people and animals they consider part of their trusted group. Neither should be discouraged or punished; if kneading claws are uncomfortable, a soft blanket between you and your cat solves it without damaging the trust the behavior represents.

Why cats scratch (and it isn't spite)

Scratching conditions the claws, stretches the muscles of the forelimbs and spine, and marks territory both visually and through scent glands in the paws — it's a physical need, not a behavior problem to eliminate. The goal is redirecting it to appropriate objects, not stopping it.

Getting scratching pointed at the right things

The ASPCA recommends offering posts in more than one material (cardboard, sisal, carpet, upholstery) and orientation (vertical, horizontal, slanted), since individual cats have real preferences. Posts should be sturdy and tall enough for a full stretch. Make them more appealing than the couch with catnip or a dangling toy, and place them where your cat already likes to scratch or climb. On furniture itself, double-sided tape, sandpaper, or an upside-down vinyl carpet runner discourages scratching there while a post nearby offers the alternative. Don't throw away a well-used, shredded post — cats often prefer the texture of one that's already

broken in, and starting over with a pristine one can undo the progress.

- Multiple posts, in different materials and orientations
- Tall and sturdy enough for a full stretch
- Placed where your cat already climbs or scratches, not tucked out of the way
- Made appealing with catnip or a toy rather than forced
- Furniture protected with tape/sandpaper rather than punishment

When it's worth bringing in a professional

Sudden new litter box avoidance, overgrooming, or aggression that wasn't there before are all signs worth a vet visit first (to rule out a medical cause) and a certified feline behaviorist after, rather than something to just wait out. Our articles on litter box avoidance and overgrooming go deeper on those two specific situations.

Cat behavior checklist

- ☐ Reading ear, tail, and whisker position to catch early stress rather than waiting for hissing
- ☐ Recognizing kneading and head-bunting as affection, not something to correct
- ☐ Understanding scratching as a physical need, not a behavior problem
- ☐ Scratching posts offered in multiple materials/orientations, placed where your cat already climbs
- ☐ Furniture scratching redirected with tape/sandpaper, not punishment
- ☐ Sudden behavior changes (litter box, grooming, aggression) treated as a vet visit first, not a personality shift

Summary

Most 'difficult' cat behavior is actually normal feline communication or instinct — reading body language early and redirecting instincts like scratching works far better than correcting or punishing what's actually a healthy cat being a cat.

This guide is for general education only and is not a substitute for advice from a certified trainer, veterinarian, or veterinary behaviorist. If you're seeing signs of distress, aggression, or a sudden change in behavior, please consult a professional who can assess your pet directly.