

New Cat Survival Guide: Tips for Behavior and Training

SHARE



If you're a new pet parent, understanding the subtleties of a cat's behavior may seem overwhelming. Fortunately, there are ways to learn more about what your cat's body language means and how to better communicate with your feline family member.

“We need to learn how our pets communicate and what different body postures and vocalizations mean in order to avoid miscommunication and misinterpretation that can lead to a compromised human-animal bond,” says Dr. Rachel Malamed, a **veterinary behaviorist** based in Los Angeles.

If you're unsure where to start when it comes to cat training and behavior, consider this your survival guide for building a lifelong bond with your cat.

Focus on Litter Box Training



If you're a new cat parent, ensuring that your cat learns how to properly use the litter box is one of the first training priorities. Luckily, cats don't need a lot of paw holding when it comes to learning litter-box etiquette, says Dr. Justine Lee, a board-certified emergency care and toxicology specialist and the author of **"It's a Cat's World... You Just Live in It."**

While cats themselves generally pick up on using the litter box quickly, pet parents tend to require more training. Lee says that **the biggest mistake** she sees new cat owners make is not having enough litter boxes in the home. She recommends having one extra litter box per cat. "If you have one cat, you need two litter boxes. If you have three cats, you need four litter boxes," she says.

Make sure to take your cat's size into consideration when choosing the right **cat litter box**, and place the boxes strategically throughout your home.

"Litter boxes should be big enough for the cat to dig, do their business, turn around, and cover up their leavings," says Danielle Bays, community cats program manager for the Humane Society of the United States. "Place your litter boxes in locations that are quiet, yet convenient, for your cat. Distribute the litter boxes through the house, not all clustered together."

When choosing a **cat litter**, look for a finely-grained one that is unscented and clumping, says Malamed. Heavily-fragranced options that are designed to mask odors could deter cats from using the litter box.

Prevent Unwanted Cat Behaviors



Most unwanted cat behaviors can often be chalked up to a lack of environmental enrichment or pet parent laziness.

To avoid common training issues, such as a cat peeing outside of the litter box, it's important to maintain a high level of tidiness.

“Be sure to keep the box very clean by scooping daily,” says Malamed. “Completely empty the box, clean it with mild soap and water, and fill it with new litter every one to two weeks.”

A cat who scratches up the furniture or curtains is another frustrating feline behavior, but it's up to pet parents to provide the proper cat scratching posts and accessories.

“Cats need their claws and they need to scratch, so it's up to you to provide your cat with appropriate scratching posts,” says Bays. “Cats scratch to stretch their limbs, remove the worn outer layer of their claws, and mark territory.”

Cat scratching posts come in a variety of shapes and textures, and finding **the perfect post for your cat** may take a little bit of trial and error, says Bays. There are vertical, horizontal and angled options made out of different materials including cardboard, rope and carpet. Bays suggests giving your cat choices at the start. “Your cat will let you know her preferences,” she says. “If she starts to scratch your favorite chair, place an alternative nearby.”

Provide the Proper Environmental Enrichment for Your Cat



In addition to giving your cat a place to scratch her nails and a litter box where she can comfortably take care of business, it's important to make sure that your cat is **physically and mentally stimulated**. “Cats need ample enrichment to satisfy normal behaviors such as hunting, scratching, playing and climbing,” says Malamed. “A lack of opportunities or appropriate outlets to perform these behaviors can result in unwanted behaviors.”

These instincts can be satisfied by learning your cat's motivations and taking time to ensure you're interacting with your cat on a regular basis. In addition to toys that your feline can play with on her own, Bays recommends using **interactive toys**, including wand toys and food puzzles, to engage with your cat.

Malamed agrees that interactive toys and food puzzles are useful cat enrichment tools. “By learning to get food out of toys with small holes, they are also using their brains,” she says. “It satisfies the need to hunt in a way that feeding from a bowl does not.”

Additionally, new feline parents should consider utilizing cat perches and cat trees and give their cats some cozy hideouts for rest and relaxation. “Cat trees and window perches are some easy ways to give your cat a variety of vantage points of her new home, while a cozy cat bed or repurposed cardboard box can provide a simple sanctuary,” says Bays.

Get in Tune with Your Cat's Signals



Although cats can't talk to us, **they are constantly communicating**. Learning to recognize specific cat body language or visual signals can help pet parents understand when their cats are feeling afraid or angry. "Cats will often signal when they perceive a threat," says Malamed. "They also have a variety of vocalizations that have different meanings."

Common signs of fear, anger or discomfort in cats include pinned back ears, an arched back, a stiff tail, dilated pupils or behaviors such as hiding or climbing up to a high vantage point. If cat owners can identify and recognize these signs, they can act appropriately and give their cats some space. "We need to respect a cat's signs of discomfort and keep our distance at times, rather than force interactions which can result in negative associations and fear of a person," Malamed adds.

Familiarizing yourself with your cat's normal behavior is ultimately a part of making sure she stays healthy. If you notice behavioral changes or shifts, it's important to contact a veterinarian. "If your cat is doing anything atypical, like hiding or sleeping in an unusual place, these are really subtle signs that cats will show when they're sick," says Lee.