



## CATS LIVING WITH HUMANS



*Cats were not originally geared towards living with humans. Quite the reverse, in fact: cats were lone independent hunters living in the wild without any social grouping. In pure survival terms, therefore, there would have been no need for them to enter into such a close bond.*

### **Attached – yet independent**

The cat is a highly adaptable creature, able to live in extremely diverse environmental conditions and therefore also capable of coexisting with humans. However, for all its domestication, and for all the care and feeding it receives from humans, it has retained its independence and lost none of its skill at providing for itself through hunting.

To domesticate cats, mankind has exploited the kitten's powerful dependency on its mother. Through breeding and rearing, this youthful lack of independence has been deliberately prolonged, thereby establishing the basis for the relationship between cats and humans. Humans who keep cats need to be aware that they are taking on responsibility for a living creature. When living with humans, cats must be provided with the appropriate environment, allowing them to behave as comes naturally to them.

### **Relating to a human being – from day one**

The intensity of the relationship between humans and cats depends on a large number of factors. Of critical importance here is the cat's personality, which is partly hereditary and partly shaped by its environment. In most cases, however, what ultimately determines the strength of the bond is the age at which the cat first comes into contact with humans. Cats that have only been exposed to other cats while growing up are unlikely to build up any close relationships with humans later on. They might accept them as food providers but they will avoid physical contact and make a point of preserving their independence. Cats that are able to establish a connection with a human at the age of three to seven weeks can later be expected to have a close relationship with that person, who will then be seen as a kind of "mother figure" for the rest of the cat's life.

### **Deepening the relationship through touching**

If a cat establishes a bond with a human at a young age, it will even accept and enjoy the kind of stroking that an adult cat would not normally permit.



Mutual touching can have a very positive influence on the intensity of the relationship. However, care must be taken to avoid forcing physical contact upon the cat or holding it tightly. Ideally, the cat should be allowed to approach the human of its own accord for stroking. The more relaxed this form of contact is, right from the start, the more the cat will seek out further proximity to this human in the future.

### ***Grief caused by neglect***

Cats are very sensitive to changes in their environment. This applies not only to major transitions such as a move or a change of furnishings but also, if the bond is a close one, to a relationship with a human.

Cats that are very closely attached to individual humans feel so strongly connected to them that they absorb their moods. So, when their trusted human is undergoing stress, they suffer a great deal. If their needs are neglected, they will feel this, immediately and painfully. It is not possible to communicate to them that sometimes such neglect may be caused by nothing more than temporary time pressure.

Likewise, any change in the family unit (e.g. the loss of a family member, the birth of a baby, the acquisition of another pet) can be extremely stressful for a cat, and this may lead to behavioural problems. Owners should factor this into their conduct, especially before getting another pet.



**TIP:** In the event of behavioural problems (e.g. sudden soiling), you should not lose heart immediately. The important thing is to find out what is causing these problems: only then can the issue be resolved.

### ***Bonding through play and activity***

When kittens play, they are not just practising hunting behaviour, they are also forming social bonds. Unlike dogs, adult cats living in the wild do not continue to play. This has a great deal to do with the fact that the cat is a loner, and therefore does not live in groups like the more “social” dog.

By contrast, cats that are looked after by people never completely unlearn the habits of their childhood – hence, for example, their lifelong interest in play. In particular, for a cat that spends all its time inside a home, play is important as a way of acting out its sexual, hunt-related and aggressive urges. Playing together is also an ideal opportunity to deepen the relationship with the cat.

There are many opportunities to engage a cat in activities. The owner might, for example, hide a small amount of dry food or treats around the home, in boxes, toilet rolls, an activity board (these can either be bought in pet shops or built at home by following online instructions) or a treat ball.

Many cats are keen on toys that smell of valerian or catnip. Cats love to capture objects that jerk away from them on a line and “hide”. One appealing way to provide cats with mental exercise is “clicker training”. Using positive reinforcement, they can be taught tricks or specific procedures. During these training sessions, the reinforcement comes from the so-called “clicker”.

New smells and objects are also exciting, so you should sometimes bring pieces of wood, stones or harmless grass and weeds home from a walk. Empty paper shopping bags (NOT plastic ones!) are handy: cats will enjoy investigating them and using them as hollow, rustling spaces, though it is vital to cut through the handles to make sure the cat cannot get caught on them. Considering that a cat living in the wild spends three to ten hours a day hunting, it is clear that you need to spend several hours a day engaging in activities with them to make sure they are properly stretched.

### ***Avoid mistakes!***

To avoid accidentally damaging your relationship with your cat, it is essential to avoid the following mistakes when dealing with them:

- **Staring:** among cats, staring straight into another cat’s eyes is a threatening gesture (see “Body language” for more). This should therefore be avoided at all costs so as not to send the cat a

threatening message while actually meaning to be friendly. Better to blink repeatedly, as this has a calming effect.

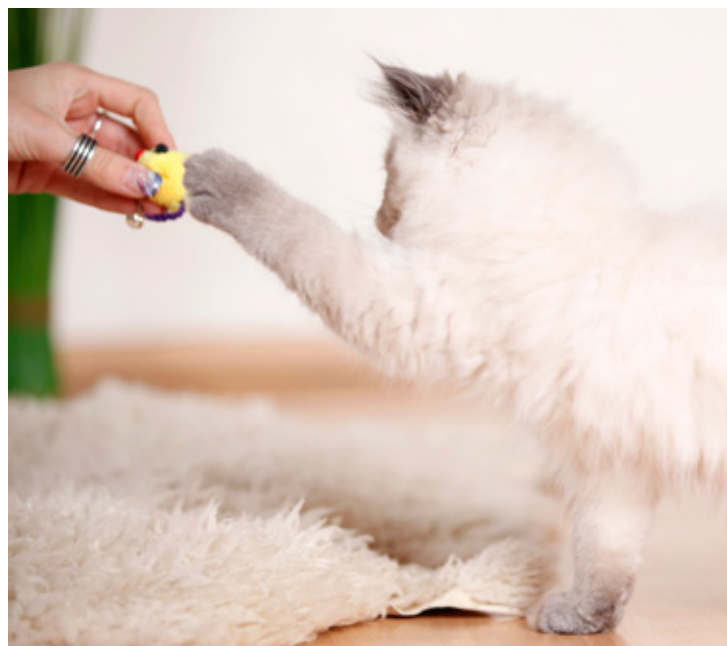
- **Loud shrill sounds:** a cat's hearing is far more highly developed than ours, particularly when it comes to high frequencies. Cats are a lot more sensitive to noise, and this should be borne in mind when living with them.
- **Frantic movements:** in general, a cat moves very quietly and cautiously. Fast movements will cause it to react nervously or fearfully.
- **Holding the cat tightly:** even if a cat trusts "its" human and has a deep bond with them, holding a cat tightly against its will is intensely stressful to it. In nature, this is something that only happens when a cat has become some enemy's prey.
- **Removing the cat from a place of retreat:** if a cat retreats into a corner or hollow space or beneath a piece of furniture, it should be left in peace. Removing the cat, even with the best of intentions in order to calm or protect it through physical contact (e.g. during a thunderstorm), will merely achieve the opposite by creating additional stress.

Cats basically prefer people whose body language is restrained. This is also the reason why they are more likely to approach people who are not really cat lovers. Such people are more reserved, and this gives the cat the necessary confidence to come closer, since it does not feel threatened by them.

*Above: Some cats can find being held stressful.*

*Centre: Playing games is a great way to strengthen the bond with your cat.*

*Below: Showing affection through gentle touch helps to build a stronger relationship between cat and owner.*



More Humanity towards Animals

