

Cats and people – Getting the Relationship Right

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AAFP and ISFM Feline Environmental Needs Guidelines

The AAFP (American Association of Feline Practitioners) and ISFM (International Society of Feline Medicine) Feline Environmental Needs Guidelines, identify five 'pillars' of a healthy feline environment, with pillar 4 relating specifically to the quality of the interaction that takes place between humans and cats.

Pillar 4

“Provide positive, consistent and predictable human-cat social interaction”¹

This presentation discusses preparing the domestic cat for life as a companion to humans and practical tips to provide the right type of interaction to suit the cat's needs. A comprehensive look at a case study puts the practical tips into action to illustrate their use and the subsequent impact on the relationship.

Although the cat is a solitary predator and survivalist with no biological requirement to form social relationships, most that have been reared with humans benefit from friendly and consistent social interaction with them. The indicators of a positive human/cat relationship for most, providing the environmental needs are met, would include:

- The ability to maintain a sense of control over the initiation of social contact
- Consistency and predictability of human response
- Positive encounters and associations, i.e. non-threatening, producing a pleasant emotional state, security, familiarity.

Preparing the domestic cat for life as a companion to humans

Early socialisation

A cat isn't born with the automatic ability to live in harmony with humans; they have to *learn* to accept a person's non-feline ways! A cat's personality is influenced by

inherited traits and the environment it's brought up in. Therefore, in order to ensure a cat makes a good pet (and enjoys being one) it's important to provide it with an upbringing full of positive associations with humans and the domestic setting. The most significant behavioural and emotional development takes place between two and seven weeks of age. This is referred to as the sensitive period as kittens are particularly receptive to learning about their environment and other species at this time². Anyone rearing a litter of kittens should take the opportunity to expose them to positive encounters with humans, dogs, other cats and any other domestic species during the first few weeks of life to give them every opportunity to form social bonds. This process is referred to as "early socialisation" and is very much the responsibility of the professional or hobby breeder.

Research conducted into the quality and quantity of handling during the sensitive period shows there are distinct benefits to providing the necessary socialisation in the right way. Most of the studies concluded that kittens that were handled by a number of different people between the ages of two and seven weeks tended to be more sociable towards humans than those that didn't benefit from such handling. The mix of humans was also important to include male and female, young and old².

Cats and people - ways to interact

There are a number of ways in which a person can interact with a familiar cat, including petting, stroking and grooming the coat (either for general enjoyment or to maintain long coats), talking to, playing with, using interactive toys, picking up and holding, allowing a cat to lie on the person's lap, sitting beside a cat or being in the same room. The life stage of the individual cat will also dictate what the owner expects, e.g. more play interaction with a kitten or more 'lap cat' time with an elderly cat. In a 1995 owner survey of 1134 cats over the age of 12 years conducted by the author³, 80.8% of the owners reported that their cats had become more sociable and affectionate towards their owner and/or more demanding of attention as they had got older. The early experience, temperament and lifestyle of the cat will also influence what the cat will tolerate or demand from the relationship.

The duration of the interaction will also have an impact on the cat, with most preferring 'high frequency, low intensity' rather than prolonged, single episodes of contact, thus mimicking the behaviour seen between cats from the same social group. One study supports this theory, showing that owners scoring highly for the trait of 'neuroticism' (long-term tendency to be in a negative emotional state) sought more contact with their cats yet had less frequent interaction with them⁴, probably due to the cats' unwillingness to reciprocate.

Examples of interaction intensity

Being in the same room as the cat
 Talking to (greeting)
 Sitting beside a cat
 Playing with, using interactive toys
 Talking to (constant)
 Allowing a cat to lie on the person's lap (without touching)
 Petting and stroking
 Grooming the coat for general enjoyment
 Grooming a long coat for maintenance
 Picking up and holding

Low intensity



High intensity

Cat/human bond spectrum – when it goes wrong



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While the negative impact of cruelty and abandonment is self-evident it should also be appreciated that 'loving' and 'caring for' cats in extreme circumstances can be detrimental, especially in situations referred to as 'animal hoarding'.

The term 'hoarding' or 'compulsive hoarding' generally refers to the collecting of possessions that has become excessive. However, the hoarding of animals can also occur and this is particularly concerning for cats, as they are sensitive to overcrowding and mixing with other cats in general.

Extensive research has been conducted into this issue in the USA, predominantly by the Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium (HARC) at Tufts University, and they define an animal hoarder as:

"Someone who accumulates a large number of animals; fails to provide minimal standards of nutrition, sanitation and veterinary care; and fails to act on the deteriorating condition of the animals (including disease, starvation and even death)

or the environment (severely overcrowded and unsanitary conditions), or the negative impact of the collection on their own health and well-being.”⁵

Not all hoarders of animals are considered the same – many have not descended to the level of living amongst dead or dying animals. To illustrate this fact, the HARC has sub-categorized hoarders into more specific groups to assess the type of intervention required⁶, including a sub-category of ‘overwhelmed caregiver’ as someone with some awareness of the difficulty of the situation and therefore more receptive to help.

Getting the relationship right

Numerous benefits have been described by owners to the author regarding the human/cat relationship, including emotional support, stress relief associated with stroking, companionship and unconditional love. Many consider their cats to be important members of the family, who are considered when planning holidays or moving house. Some people even report choosing property dependent on the perceived needs of the cat. In the author’s experience, the cat seems to provide the ultimate ‘blank canvas’ where the quality and complexity of the relationship can be interpreted, usually in an anthropomorphic way, to fit in with the owner’s expectations and relational needs. This can lead to complications and a negative impact on the cat’s wellbeing if behaviour is being misunderstood. However all is not lost and positive change can occur by identifying communication breakdowns and restoring balance into the owner/cat relationship by changing the way the person relates to and interacts with the cat. Often that change in interactive style has to be accompanied by a genuine change in attitude and beliefs to achieve long-term benefits. The following is an illustration of this.

Case study (The names have been changed but the client gave permission for her case to be discussed as part of this presentation.)

Sarah lived with her husband Mike on a residential estate. The area had a high cat population; there had been numerous incidents of cats fighting in and around her garden.

Sarah was referred to the author for a behavioural consultation for Cuddles, to address this cat’s aggressive behaviour. Her veterinary surgeon had completed a thorough health check and found nothing that might cause or exacerbate the ‘problem’ behaviour.

The following are extracts from Sarah regarding her cat's behaviour:

"Whenever I was in my dressing gown, she would snuggle right up to me. Gradually, she did this less and became irritated by my attempt to stroke her. This resulted in swipes with her claws out, and bites. I have become better at reading her body language, but now, 2 months in, the bites are coming out of nowhere".

"I will be able to pet Cuddles and she will appear happy and content, rubbing her scent on me with her head and tail, then this will get less and just as I start to feel confident that we are getting somewhere I sense a change in her, she even looks different usually."

"I am becoming afraid of my own cat, and feel that we will never be able to have a relaxed home again unless I let her go."

Sarah completed a comprehensive questionnaire regarding the environment, the people, the cat and the problem behaviour.

After an extensive consultation in Sarah's home it became clear that Cuddles' behaviour was as a direct result of the owner's interactive style. Cuddles had a history of inadequate early socialisation and her behaviour (sitting with her back to us, no initiation of contact, no vocal greeting on entering the room etc.) suggested that her preference would be for 'cohabitation' rather than an intense relationship. Unfortunately Sarah wanted a specific type of relationship with a cat – close physical contact (consider the name given), and both initiating and receiving "love" at will. She focused constantly on her cat and, due to Cuddles' reluctance, always initiated any social contact. This was becoming stressful and frustrating for the cat, as she was far more focused on the territorial pressure from the volume of cats outside. She soon learned that aggressive behaviour, either biting or scratching, resulted in a withdrawal from Sarah.

Sarah stated that she had become sensitive to Cuddles' changing body language, yet she was still disregarding the signals and persevering on the understanding that if her behaviour was motivated with love that the "message would eventually get through".

Behaviour modification techniques can manage this kind of problem however, after discussions with Sarah and her husband, they accepted it was unwise to progress with this cat in her current environment. Sarah had serious health problems and admitted that her health had deteriorated as a direct result of the stress associated with living with Cuddles.

There can be situations when a cat is in the wrong environment, either due to social pressures from other cats or, as in this case, a combination of both this and mismatched owner/cat expectations of a relationship. In accordance with the client's wishes, the cat was rehomed to a more suitable environment. With the help of a charity, Cuddles was found a home with a single man (carefully selected for gender and the naturally lower intensity style of interaction) in a low cat population density area. The following photograph and email confirm that Sarah's decision had been the right one.

"Meggs (formerly known as Cuddles), is just brilliant. Totally adorable and loving. Can't believe she ever had any issues!"



Meggs, aka Cuddles

Against the advice given, Sarah decided to get a second cat quickly. The concerns were that she would continue with the same interactive style and even transfer her fear of Cuddles to the new cat. However, Sarah and her husband decided to deliver Cuddles to the charity and collect a two-year-old domestic shorthair F(s) on the same day. Sarah gave her the name Mew Mew.

Sarah sought advice for the first few months, both to come to terms with the feelings of loss for one and to build confidence with Mew Mew (e.g. advice regarding the application of a spot-on flea treatment).

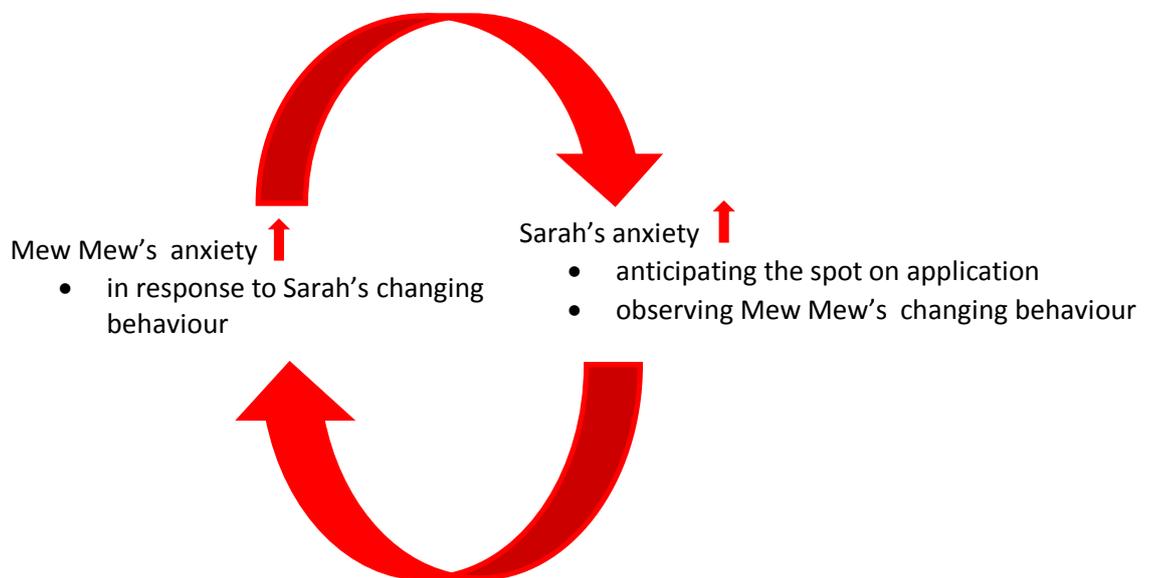
Eighteen months later, Sarah emailed:

"I applied her spot on treatment 2 weeks ago and that's when her current behavioural issues began. I have never done anything to her with regards to the usual 'routine maintenance' on my own before. We have always done it with Mike on account that it requires both of us. Probably due to this she is usually wary of Mike when he enters the house from work.

When I applied the spot on it was as if everything froze. I can still see the shocked body language she displayed (dilated pupils) and for a few seconds, she just looked at me shocked and I imagine my face to her was a similar story."

Since that day Mew Mew had continued to behave in a way suggesting she was anxious (hiding, running away from her, etc). A second consultation was booked after a health check, where no physical cause for the behaviour was identified. Sarah was keen to have the consultation prior to the next spot on application.

During the consultation Sarah was given the opportunity to talk about her concerns regarding the problem. Undoubtedly she is an extremely conscientious owner who really wants to do the right thing and provide optimum care. She believed that the application of the spot on treatment caused Mew Mew some stress and that the anxiety caused remained at a high level for some time afterwards. This was without awareness of the impact of her own emotional state on her cat's behaviour. The build-up of tension experienced in Sarah created a cyclical pattern of anxiety that caused a positive feedback loop of increasing anxiety in both parties.



A Behaviour Modification Programme (BMP) was put in place that focused on changing the owner's interactive style and facilitating dialogue, via active listening, to enable Sarah to explore her thoughts, beliefs and behaviour using the theoretical principles of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). They suggest that the meaning a person gives to life events rather than the events themselves causes disturbance. In the author's experience, if an owner's behaviour towards a companion animal is based purely on emotional considerations then intellectual reasoning is absent despite being a necessary component of a functional relationship. As Sarah was a psychotherapist this worked extremely well and enabled her, through the relationship with the cat behaviour counsellor, to explore negative or irrational thoughts that were impacting on her behaviour towards Mew Mew. On a practical

level, an easy step to take in the first instance was to review the flea and worming protocol. Her referring veterinarian in turn recommended the least invasive preventive parasite treatment that would suit the needs of the individual case (mix of injections and longer-lasting oral treatments).

The BMP put in place included the following instructions regarding attitude that Sarah and Mike needed to adopt:

- Give Mew Mew, until further notice, a ‘cloak of invisibility’ which involves no initiation of contact with her. Even a quick glance to look at her would be noticed.
- If Mew Mew rubs around your legs this should not be responded to by making any physical or verbal contact, as this is a marking gesture and not a request for contact.
- If Mew Mew directly ‘requests’ physical contact then this should be brief in response, both physical and verbal, always leaving her wanting slightly more rather than her withdrawing because the contact is too much.
- Concentrate on genuinely feeling relaxed about Mew Mew.
- Remember – you can’t fake it with a cat!!!

Other concerns were also addressed so that Sarah had a clear idea of husbandry requirements to provide optimum care, always with the emphasis that ‘good enough’ cat care would be preferable in this case to a highly involved style of ownership.



Mew Mew

Sarah’s relationship with Mew Mew continues to flourish and as each day passes the changes Sarah has made to her interactive style become more established and natural. Mew Mew is not exhibiting any of the anxious behaviour previously seen and her routines and daily habits, including initiating some contact with her owner, suggest that she is more relaxed in her relationship with Sarah.

Practical tips for getting the relationship right

There is a wide spectrum of social receptivity in cats so behaving in a way that appears non-threatening and allowing the cat to initiate contact is best when meeting a cat for the first time. For example

- Reduce height to the cat's level
- Avoid direct eye contact
- Allow the cat to approach
- Extend a hand and focus any physical contact on the head and cheeks

Interaction with a cat may differ according to the life stage (i.e. kitten, adult, older cat) and whether or not other cats are in close proximity. Rather than adopting a 'one size fits all' approach to interaction, it may be preferable to adapt and adjust by reading the cat's body language and appreciating the needs of the individual, always bearing in mind the maxim 'keep it brief and follow the cat's lead'. The following are examples of positive and negative body language to help determine whether or not a cat is receptive to contact.

Positive signs – indicating relaxation and willingness to interact

- Friendly approach with tail vertical
- Slow blinking
- Purring
- Chirruping
- Facial rubbing
- Head bunting
- Jumping onto the lap
- Staying in close proximity
- Rolling over to expose the belly (not to be confused with a request to be touched in this area!)

Negative signs - indicating tension and/or reluctance to interact

- Stiffening of the body
- Purring stops
- Low carriage tail 'wagging'
- Hissing
- Struggling
- Avoidant behaviour

Each cat is an individual and each human/cat relationship is unique. Therefore recommending standard ways to interact or behave with cats will always be a generalisation that doesn't take into account the huge variety of relational needs that exists in the companion cat population. Therefore learning about the species, getting to know the individual's likes and dislikes and allowing the cat to dictate the quality and quantity of interaction may be the key to getting the relationship right.

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