

# Behavior Tips: *Five myths about cat behaviour*

## MYTH 1: CATS CANNOT BE TRAINED



Whether you know it or not, you have probably already trained your cat! Training can include things such as litter box training, getting in the carrier to go to the vet, or scratching a post instead of furniture. Cats can be taught many, if not all, the tricks you can teach your dog. They can be taught to tolerate veterinary or grooming care, and even can be trained to learn fun tricks such as “sit” or “sit pretty!”

Cats should be trained using positive reinforcement, (i.e., getting a treat after doing the desired behavior).

Please do not use positive punishment (i.e., spraying with water or yelling/hitting when they do something that is undesirable). This will increase the cat’s anxiety and fear and can damage the human-feline bond.

Think about it - you have probably already trained your cat to do many things!

## MYTH 2: CATS ARE NOT SOCIAL

Cats are often seen as solitary because they socialize differently from dogs. From an evolutionary lens, dogs evolved to cooperatively work together on hunts and were domesticated, whereas cats are sit-and-wait predators who have not been domesticated. However, cats are highly social!



Cats recognize individuals and interact differently depending on their relationship to those individuals. They demonstrate their close relationships by grooming and sleeping near each other and seeking out each other’s company. Cats communicate through body language (i.e., body/tail posture), tactile communication (i.e., rubbing), auditory communication (i.e., trill), and especially through scents (i.e., rubbing).

Cats, as long as they are handled from an early age, are very social with people. In fact, the “meow” vocalization is seldom heard in feral cat colonies (it is only used between mothers and kittens). However, cats “meow” at humans to attract their attention. Cats also modify their normal cat-to-cat communication signals to communicate with their owners.

## MYTH 3: CATS SHOW THEY ARE HAPPY BY FLICKING THEIR TAILS

It is a common misconception that a cat wagging or flicking its tail means that it is happy.

The following tail behaviors are noted when a cat is irritated or exhibiting predatory/play behavior, NOT when your cat is happy:

- A very tense cat will hold its tail close to its body in a downward or bent forward position and it may be twitching.
- A cat thrashing its tail is angry or irritated and may be trying to tell you to stop.
- When your cat’s tail tip is twitching and they are not playing or hunting, they are slightly irritated or becoming aroused.
- Cats swish their tails when they are intently focused (and may be about to pounce). This important predatory behavior is seen in indoor and outdoor cats.



If your cat’s tail is quivering, your cat is excited. When a cat wraps its tail around you it demonstrates that the cat is willing to interact. This can be compared to a hug or a handshake!

## MYTH 4: CATS ONLY PURR WHEN THEY ARE HAPPY



Although purring is commonly associated with contentedness, cats also purr when experiencing slight anxiety. This anxious purr is different from a contented/relaxed purr. When a cat is purring, it is important to look at the cat’s behavior and body language to determine what type of purr they are demonstrating. If your cat looks relaxed, it is safe to assume that it is a happy purr. The happy purr sound is very different from that of a hungry purr. Hungry cats combine their purr with a “meow” sound.

Purring serves a purpose. Mother cats with newborns purr to form a bond with their kittens, while newborn kittens purr to let their mother know that they are okay. Cats are also known to purr when they are experiencing pain. It is theorized that this is a way to self-soothe. Research has shown that purring may also help the cat heal faster by sending low frequency vibrations throughout the body. Remarkable!

## MYTH 5: CATS URINATE/DEFECATE OUTSIDE OF THE LITTERBOX TO “GET BACK” AT THEIR OWNER



Your cat is NOT punishing you by eliminating outside of their litter box!

There are three reasons why cats urinate outside the litter box:

- (1) an inadequate litter box environment
- (2) medical problems
- (3) behavioral problems

You don’t like to use a dirty cramped bathroom, so why should your cat? Your cat may be trying to tell you their litterbox set up is unacceptable. The ideal litter box is clean, scooped out every day with a change of litter once per week. The box should be 1.5 times the length of the cat (without the tail) and easy for the cat to enter/exit. There should be one more litter box than the total number of cats in your household. The litter itself should be 2-3 inches deep and can be whatever variety of litter your cat prefers. Experiment with different types and let your cat decide their favorite!

If your cat is still refusing to use your perfect litter boxes there may be a medical issue at play. There are common medical reasons for inappropriate elimination that alter normal bowel and bladder function (i.e., urinary tract infections, GI parasites, and even arthritis can keep them from being able to access the litter box). Your veterinarian can tell.

If your cat has a clean bill of health and a perfect litter box, there may be a behavioral problem such as anxiety, aversion or social stress. For instance, cats who previously had constipation may now fear the litter box because they associate it with painful defecation.

Finally, spraying (when a cat sprays a stream of urine against a vertical surface) may be a normal behavior or could be due to anxiety regarding the social situation of the cat.

*Although these tips are helpful, please discuss any behavioural/medical concerns with your local veterinarian. For all cases where you still have concerns, seek specialist services ([www.dacvb.org](http://www.dacvb.org)). At AVC you can contact the AVC Behavioural Medicine Service ([AVCBehaviouralMed@upeu.ca](mailto:AVCBehaviouralMed@upeu.ca)).*