Cat body language

Read the animal before you say hello.

Cats rarely warn for long: they freeze, hide or flee first [1]. In any animal, read the whole body: one sign alone can mislead [2, 3].



Calm ~~

Relaxed and at ease. **Fine to say hello, if they come to you.**

EYES soft; slow blinks

TAIL up, with a curved tip, to greet

BODY loose, standing easy

[1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8]



Alert

Interested, assessing. **Pause. Let them look first.**

EARS upright, toward the sound

EYES open and watching

TAIL still; the tip may twitch

[5]



Playful

An invitation to play. **Keep it gentle and short, with breaks.**

STALK creeps low, then pounces

BELLY up in play: not a request to rub

TOYS a wand toy, not your hand

[1, 9, 10]



Stressed

Uneasy. **Stop what you are doing. Give room.**

EARS turned out to the sides

EYES pupils dilated

BODY crouched and tense

[1, 4, 5]



Fearful

Wants to get away. **Back off. Never corner, reach or lean over.**

EARS flat, sideways or back

EYES pupils fully dilated

BODY crouched low, tail tucked in

[1, 5, 9]



Warning

A clear request for space. **Stop. Move away calmly, and don't stare back.**

EARS flattened to the head

MOUTH open; hiss, spit or growl

BODY arched, side-on, fur raised

[4, 9]

Meeting a shelter cat

Ask the staff first, and read the kennel card [2, 11]. Then: [1, 6, 12, 13, 14]



1. Get down to the cat's level. Don't lean over or stare.



2. Hold out a soft hand, not too close. Let the cat choose to sniff.



3. Stroke the head and cheeks. Avoid the belly and the base of the tail.



4. Let a hiding cat hide: a hiding box lowers stress.

SOURCES All sources read 14 October 2026.

1 Rodan I et al. (2022). AAFP/ISFM Cat Friendly veterinary interaction guidelines: approach and handling techniques. J Feline Med Surg 24:1093–1132. doi:10.1177/1098612X221128760

2 ASPCA. Dog bite prevention. aspca.org

3 Beerda B et al. (2000). Behavioural and hormonal indicators of enduring environmental stress in dogs. Anim Welf 9:49–62. doi:10.1017/S0962728600022247

4 RSPCA. Understanding your cat's behaviour. rspca.org.uk

5 Kessler MR, Turner DC (1997). Stress and adaptation of cats housed singly, in pairs and in groups in boarding catteries. Anim Welf 6:243–254. Table as reproduced by Maddie's Fund.

6 Humphrey T et al. (2020). The role of cat eye narrowing movements in cat–human communication. Sci Rep 10:16503. doi:10.1038/s41598-020-73426-0

7 Humphrey T et al. (2020). Slow blink eye closure in shelter cats is related to quicker adoption. Animals 10:2256. doi:10.3390/ani10122256

8 Cafazzo S, Natoli E (2009). The social function of tail up in the domestic cat. Behav Processes 80:60–66. doi:10.1016/j.beproc.2008.09.008

9 ASPCA. Aggression in cats. aspca.org

10 International Cat Care. Why do cats..? icatcare.org (updated 26 Sept 2025)

11 Humane Society of Silicon Valley (2025). Shy dog training guide: consent petting. hssv.org. Shelter practice, not a trial.

12 van der Leij WJR et al. (2019). The effect of a hiding box on stress levels and body weight in Dutch shelter cats. PLoS ONE 14:e0223492. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0223492

13 Ellis SLH et al. (2015). The influence of body region, handler familiarity and order of region handled on the domestic cat's response to being stroked. Appl Anim Behav Sci 173:60–67. doi:10.1016/j.applanim.2014.11.002

14 Kry K, Casey R (2007). The effect of hiding enrichment on stress levels and behaviour of domestic cats in a shelter setting. Anim Welf 16:375–383. doi:10.1017/S0962728600027196

Corrections: hello@petnecto.com