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A FIELD GUIDE FOR MEETING SHELTER PETS
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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.

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