

The Telltale Tail

Suggested Grade Levels: K-6

Subject: Language Arts/Science

Character: Respect – Safety with Pets

Materials and technology to be used:

- “Tail Language” posters (versions for both older and younger students) – **x1 per student**
- “Cat Tail Match” cards – **x1 per small group**
- “Cat Body Language” packet – **x1 page for each student**
- Large whiteboard or chalkboard – **x1**
- Sticky notes – **x1 per student**
- Paper – **x1 per student**
- Pencils – **x1 per student**
- Crayons – **x enough for each student**

Objective(s):

Students will be able to read common cat body language and have a better understanding of how to stay safe and respectful around cats.

Anticipatory Set/Hook:

Contact the **NHS Education Department** at **402.444.7800 ext 2214** and invite a **Humane Educator from the Nebraska Humane Society** to visit your room with a live cat. Do not let any students see the cat and save the “special visitor” for the end of the lesson. Tell students that today they are going to get to learn all about cat body language.

Lesson Beginning:

1. To gather a “feeler” on your class, conduct a brief survey - Ask students to give a thumbs up if they like cats, thumbs down if they do not, and thumb sideways if they are indifferent to cats. Take a count and write these numbers on the board.
2. Ask students: “How do you think cats communicate?” Have students turn and talk with a neighbor. Call on a couple volunteers to share their thoughts.
3. Discuss the importance of body language in cat communication. Cats will use their ears, eyes, back, tail, and even their whiskers to tell you how they are feeling. Tell students cats communicate most of their feelings through their body – especially with one part of their body in particular.

4. Divide your whiteboard into 5 columns and label with "ears", "eyes", "back", "tail" and "whiskers". Ask students to guess which of these body parts tend to be the most expressive part of a cat's body and tends to give the most information about how the cat is feeling. Have students write their answer on a sticky note and place it on the board in the appropriate column. Discuss how the "tail" is the most expressive part of a cat's body!
5. Ask students: "Why is it important to closely observe a cat's body language and listen to what they are telling us?" Turn and talk. Share.
6. Revisit the survey numbers from the beginning. Tell students that even if they do not like a certain animal (i.e., cats), it is imperative that they are still respectful to that animal no matter what. It is important to pay attention to a cat's body language and listen to what they are telling us so that **WE** stay safe and the **CAT** is respected and stays happy/healthy.

Middle of Lesson:

1. Pass out a "Tail Language" poster to each student. You may utilize either the "Older" or "Younger" version depending on the age/development of your students.
 2. Separate students into groups of 2 or 3 and allow a couple of minutes for free exploration of the posters within the small groups.
 3. Once students are familiar with the poster, discuss each expression or feeling with the students and describe what the cat tail is doing.
 4. Pass out a set of "Cat Tail Match" cards to each group and engage students in a game of memory. Students will have to match up a picture of a cat's tail with the expression or feeling that the tail is demonstrating.
- Allow students to use their "Tail Language" posters for the first round and then challenge them to go without it for the second!

End of Lesson:

1. Have all students go back to their seats.
2. Assign each student a different cat *feeling or expression of emotion*. There will be students with the same "feeling." Pass out the corresponding informational page from the "Cat Body Language Packet" to each student.
3. Inform students that they are going to be using their informational page to conduct research on their assigned cat feeling and then they will get to create a small poster about that feeling

to share with their classmates.

- Pass out a sheet of computer paper to each student to use as their poster.
- Have all students create an illustration of their cat/body language in the middle of the poster and then surround the illustration with information about how cats show that feeling with their body language. Encourage facts and bulleted information from older students, and simple drawings/labels for younger students.
- This activity can be done in a group or individually.
- Adapt as necessary for younger students.



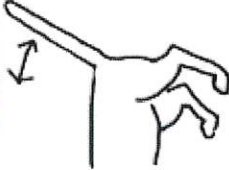


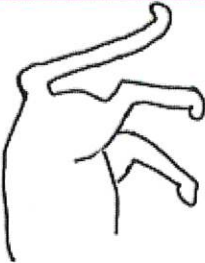






Closure:

1. Have students form a circle sitting on the ground. Tell them that they are now going to get to practice using their new knowledge to observe how cats communicate their feelings!
2. Lay down basic ground rules – stay sitting on your pockets, no talking, no touching the cat.
3. Tell students that they may **not** get to pet the cat **at all**, depending on how the cat feels. Allow the **NHS Humane Educator** to introduce the special cat visitor.
4. Invite the visiting cat into the middle of the circle to roam freely within an XPEN. Have students observe the cat's body language as he/she explores around the circle. Remind students that cats are easily scared, and typically do not like new surroundings, so it is important that they just watch the cat with their eyes and do not try to touch. This is observation only! Have students sit on their hands to help with this. **NO** petting.

-Ask students to describe what they are observing. What is the tail doing? Ears? Back? How do you think _____ feels right now?

5. Once the **Humane Educator** is holding the cat, ask if it is alright for students to pet. Depending on the comfort level of the cat, the Educator may or may not let the students pet the cat. If petting is allowed, the Educator will give additional rules on how to safely meet and greet the cat.

The Teltale Tail

friendly and content		non-threatening, unsure		derisive	
friendly, but unsure		amicable, not fearful or aggressive		defensive aggression	
angry		potentially aggressive		submissive	
very happy to see you		excited, angry or irritable		alert, interested	

Cat Tail Speak



I'm scared



*I'm happy
to see you*



*I'm getting
upset*



Let's be friends



*Hmmm. I'm
interested*



*I'm crazy
about you*



I feel loving



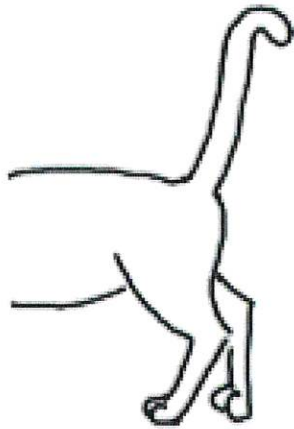
I'm worried



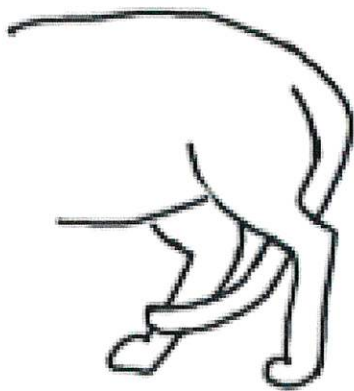
I'm mad



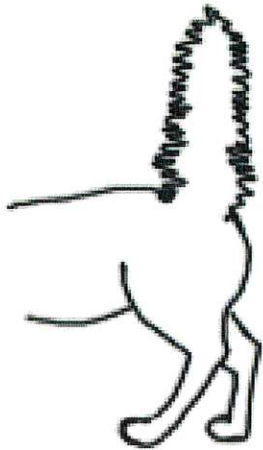
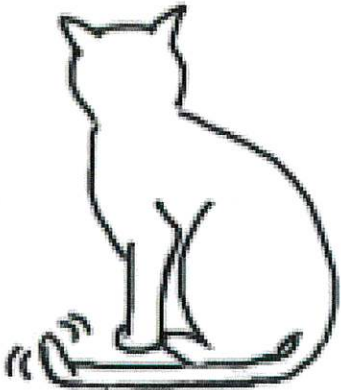
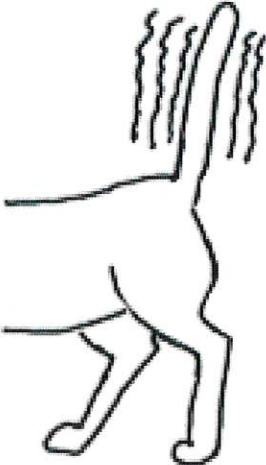
Happy



Friendly



**Scared, Worried, or
Submissive**

	<p>Angry</p>
	<p>Alert, Interested, or Getting Upset</p>
	<p>Excited or Happy to see you!</p>

Cat Tail Match



NEBRASKA
HUMANE
SOCIETY

Where help becomes hope.

Nebraska Humane
Society

Cat Body Language



NEBRASKA
HUMANE
SOCIETY

Where help becomes hope.

Neutral/Relaxed

This is how your cat should spend most of their waking hours and is a vital part of cat language - relaxed, content and comfortable in familiar surroundings. They should look like they're content to watch the world go by.



Signs of neutral cat behavior

- If lying down, they could be stretched out, curled up into a ball, or lying on their front with paws neatly tucked underneath them.
- Their eyes might be blinking softly, or half closed.
- Their ears will be relaxed, held casually upright and forward - although they could swivel around independently if your cat is listening to things around them.
- Their whiskers will be relaxed, away from the sides of their face, and they may almost appear to smile!
- Their body is nice and relaxed, with no tension to suggest they might be about to spring into action.

Focused

They may look cute and fluffy, but from birth your cat is designed to be an excellent hunter - they can stalk and catch prey with ease and are capable of focusing 100% on their target. If your cat is concentrating on a small, moving object, or on something new in their immediate area, you'll notice that their body language will change as they try to work out how to best respond to it.



Signs of focused cat behavior

- Their eyes will be open with pupils narrowed.
- Their ears and whiskers will be pricked forward, with their body angled towards the focus of their attention.
- Their body might be low to the ground as they stalk, with hind legs coiled under their body.
- Your cat's tail language will show focus by being held out low behind them. The end of their tail, along with their hindquarters, might be twitching as they get ready to pounce. This is one of the more obvious cat tail signs to look out for - once you see it, you'll know they're hunting!
- If the object of their focus is you, for example if they're trying to get food or strokes, they might rub against you with tail held in the air, but don't be fooled - they're still focused on their end goal!

Happy

A happy cat is easy to recognize - you should be able to pick up their cat body language easily. This is the state you'll want your cat to be in as much as possible, as it's the perfect state for quality time between you and your cat.



Signs of happy cat behavior

- When sitting, your cat will be relaxed and upright, with ears pointed up and forward, but relaxed, sometimes swiveling gently towards familiar sounds like your family's voices.
- When lying down, they may have their paws tucked neatly underneath them, or be lying stretched out on their side or even on their back, with legs spread outwards, which shows they are very happy!
- They may snooze with their eyes closed or half open, or look heavy-lidded - almost like they are daydreaming at times! If they blink very slowly, try blinking slowly back to show you're relaxed too - this mimicking behavior is a great way to bond with your cat.
- Whiskers will be relaxed and their tail still - or held high with a slight curl if they're standing to say hello to you.
- If you stroke your cat, their eyes may close in contentment and they will gently purr.

Anxious

Cats can be very sensitive, especially to change. It can take some time for cats to settle after unexpected changes, so learning to read the symptoms of anxious cat behavior can help you help your cat back to a relaxed state. The sooner you recognize this in your cat's body language, the sooner you can offer a reassuring stroke when they approach you for reassurance, and some attention. Give your cat 2-3 days after any big change to become accustomed to it, and to return to normal.



Signs of anxious cat behavior

- Your cat's eyes will be open and not blinking, with pupils dilated into an oval or circle.
- Their ears might move from their relaxed forward position to scan for more information, swiveling around independently from each other. If they are very anxious, they may even flatten back to their head.
- Their head will begin to lower, with whiskers pulled back to the side to appear small and non-threatening - or even be swept forward on alert.
- As anxiety increases, your cat might start to cower, or their back might arch to prepare to run.
- Cat tail language is very important here - their tail might be still or moving slowly side to side at the tip, which is a sign of anxiety. If you see this distinctive cat tail sign, make sure to offer some reassurance.

Fearful

Anxious cat behavior might be subtle, but when your cat is afraid, it should be easier to spot - if they're scared by something such as loud noises, your cat won't be reassured by a stroke, and it's likely that even their favorite treat might not do the trick. Their body language is telling you that they're frightened, and it will only return to normal when they feel safe. Try not to move quickly to try and comfort them, as you could be seen as another threat. Instead, remove anything that could be causing their fear if you can, and wait for them to calm down. If your cat is showing these signs often, you may want to consult your vet who will be able to refer you to a pet behaviorist. Visit www.capbt.org for more information and to find a pet behaviorist.



Symptoms of fearful cat behavior

- Your cat's ears will be flattened back against their head, which might be lowered with gaze angled upwards.
- They may run away or stand or crouch very still if this isn't possible.
- Their eyes will be open very wide, with pupils fully dilated and whiskers flattened or bristling.
- They may hiss or spit at close threats, growl or strike with claws out.
- Some cats will straighten their front legs to make themselves look taller or arch their backs and fluff themselves up to look bigger.
- Their tail may be held under their body or be slashing vigorously from side to side.

Frustrated

Your cat might be actively frustrated at a short-term specific event, like not being able to reach their favorite toy, or be affected by longer-term, more depressive frustration at a lack of stimulation, such as not being able to express their need to hunt.

Cats with longer-term frustration can often be misinterpreted, so if you think that your cat might be experiencing this, it's important to talk it through with your vet so that you're able to help return them to a happier state of mind.



Symptoms of frustrated cat behavior

- An actively frustrated cat usually focuses intently on their object of frustration, and will try everything they can do to get what they want!
- All their senses are tuned onto their goal - eyes will be wide open with pupils dilated, ears forward, and whiskers forward-pointing and spread.
- They may pace impatiently if they can't get to what they want.
- Cats can't maintain this frustration forever, so if they can't get what they want, they will either give up, or in some cases enter into a longer-term frustration or even depression, depending on the source of their frustration.
- Cats with longer-term depression may often be lethargic, off their food and won't want to play or interact with others.

Angry

If your cat displays angry behavior, you'll need to tread very carefully. Always avoid provoking an angry cat - don't stare or shout at them, or make sudden movements, and avoid trying to touch or comfort them as they may interpret this as an added threat and lash out. Instead, retreat slowly, remove any threats if it's safe to do so and give your cat time and space to calm down.

If your cat is displaying body language signs that they are angry on a regular basis, you may wish to seek the help of your vet or an animal behaviorist who can help you fully understand the cause of such negative cat body language.

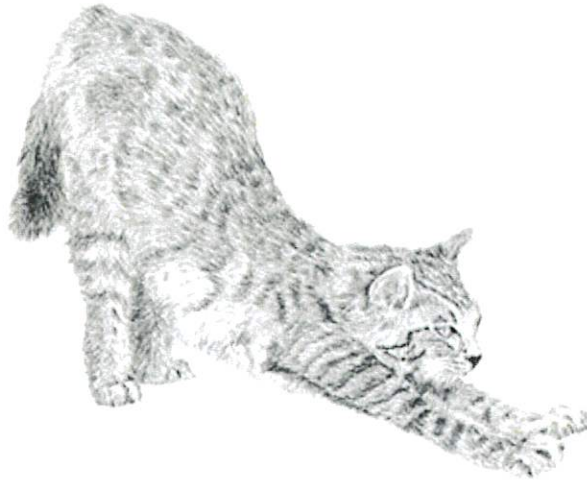


Symptoms of angry cat behavior

- An angry cat will be rigid, with tail held out stiff and straight or curled around and under their body.
- They will act very differently from usual - they could be silent, hissing, spitting or growling.
- They will try to look large and threatening, with fur erect, stiff front legs, or crouching in a threatening manner.
- Their ears will be tense, and flat back against their head, and whiskers will be stiff away from their face.
- Their eyes will be hard and focused. Their pupils may be narrowed, although some cats might have round, unblinking eyes.

Relieved

When an angry, scared or frustrated cat feels reassured that the perceived threat has gone, they will likely start to act relieved. Just as it's important that you recognize when they are feeling angry or frightened, learning to tell when your cat is relieved is key to helping them feel like their normal, relaxed selves again.



Symptoms of relieved cat behavior

- A cat's whole body can show relief - some cats even make a full-body stretch to release tension!
- Their eyes, ears, head, body and tail will all visibly relax.
- Whiskers will return to a calm, position away from the face, and their head will lower.
- Some may yawn, turn away and half-close their eyes, or even have a good wash.

Resource: Purina – Understanding Your Cat's Body Language

<https://www.purina.co.uk/cats/behaviour-and-training/understanding-cat-behaviour/cat-body-language>