



Cat Behaviour Guide

Petting Etiquette - The Cat Consent Test



Cats are delightful animals so it's only natural to want to interact with them, but every cat is unique and they might not always appreciate the attention. Our affection can sometimes feel overwhelming, so it's important to respect their boundaries and give them both choice and control in interactions. A simple way to do this is by using a 'Consent Test' before petting. This guide explains how to ask your cat if they want to be petted so you can build a deeper, more trusting connection with them.

Cat Consent Test

Asking for consent before petting allows your cat to choose if they want to interact, which builds trust and helps them feel safe. When a cat knows their boundaries will be respected, they may feel more confident and seek your affection. This can even reduce swatting and biting. Encourage everyone, including guests, to ask for consent and respect when they say 'no.'

Did You Know? Many cats feel uncomfortable when picked up or held. They may feel like they don't have choice or control in the interaction, or they could feel unsafe without a solid surface under their paws. Let the cat decide where they feel safest before attempting to pick them up.

Here are the steps to a Consent Test:

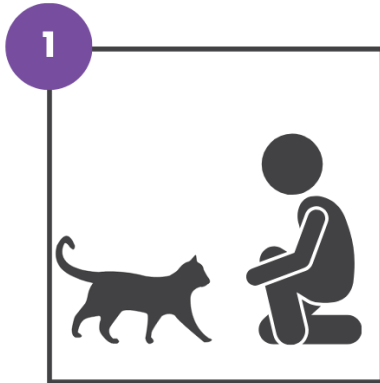
1. **Crouch Down:** Speak quietly, move slowly, and wait for the cat to approach you. Avoid direct eye contact and staring, which can be intimidating and rude. Slowly blink and look away to help them feel comfortable.
2. **Extend Your Hand:** Hold your hand or pointer finger low to the ground and wait for the cat to approach. If they seem disinterested, respect their space. If the cat approaches, let them sniff your hand. Sniffing alone is not consent!
3. **Consent is Given:** If they rub against your hand or lean into you, they're likely open to petting. Most cats prefer being petted around the cheeks, chin or behind their ears. Avoid reaching over their head, as this can feel threatening. After about three seconds of petting, stop and offer your hand again to ensure they're still interested.

Tip: If you're unsure, start by petting areas they've already rubbed against you.

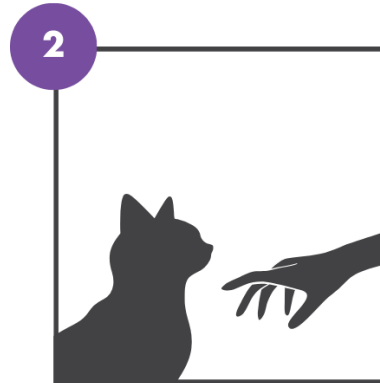
Consent is NOT Given: If the cat does not approach or is leaning or looking away from you, they are not giving consent. If they show signs of discomfort, distraction or disinterest, stop petting immediately.



Steps for a Cat Consent Test




1
Crouch down and let the cat approach you.



2
Offer a hand or finger for them to sniff.

3

A




If the cat rubs against your hand or leans into you, they may be comfortable being touched. Pet them in areas they like, such as the cheeks, chin or around the ears.

Frequently check in with the cat: After about 3 seconds of petting, **repeat step 2** to make sure they're still interested.

OR

B



If the cat doesn't approach you or looks away, they don't want to be touched.

Do not continue attempting to pet or interact with them.



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Did You Know? When a cat flops onto their side or rolls onto their back, it's called a **social roll**. This is a sign of trust, meaning "**I feel safe and relaxed**"—and they might even be inviting play. They are not asking for a belly rub!

Signs of Discomfort

Responding to early signs of discomfort can prevent a cat from resorting to swatting or biting to signal that they've had enough. Watch for these cues and stop petting immediately if you see them:

- Licking their lips or nose
- Looking or leaning away
- Ducking to avoid your hand
- Ears pointing backward or to the side
- Looking at your hand or a distraction
- Dilated pupils
- Tail thumping or flicking rapidly
- Purring suddenly stops

Building Trust Over Time

As you bond with your cat, you won't always need to follow every step before petting. Over time, they'll trust that you will respect their cues, and you'll learn their preferences and boundaries. However, no matter how long you've been together, regularly asking for consent helps maintain and strengthen your relationship.

Additional Resources:

For more information, visit our website: <http://www.edmontonhumanesociety.com>

Did You Know?

You can also ask us behavioural questions by emailing: askthespecialist@edmontonhumanesociety.com

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