

The curious character of cats – and whether they are really more aloof

May 11 2017, by Jenna Kiddie



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

To some people, cats are the perfect pet. Intelligent, elegant, calming companions, capable of dealing with their own exercise and cleaning. To others, they are frustratingly independent, cool and aloof. So what is the true nature of the domestic cat?

The cats many of us choose to share our homes with did indeed evolve from a solitary species, the African wildcat (*Felis silvestris lybica*). But feral domestic cats can form colonies, based on friendly and reciprocal relationships when resources are plentiful.

This capacity to live in social groups has been exploited by humans for thousands of years. Before realising their value as animal companions, communities initially took advantage of the cat's prowess as predators of vermin species to safeguard crops. Cats are now one of the most popular companion animal species in the world. There are over 10m estimated to be [living in the UK alone](#), and around 25% of UK households own at least one cat.

So cats clearly share some characteristics with other pet species to make them such a popular addition to the home. They are able to satisfy people's need for a human-animal bond, providing owners with social and emotional support. And the fact that cats often engage in undesirable behaviours (from an owner's perspective) such as hunting, mean that that bond must have the capacity to be very strong.

Cats have not been as commonly studied as dogs when it comes to [social behaviour](#) and people (possibly because they are not perceived to be such willing subjects). Nevertheless, [studies](#) have shown that cats form affectionate bonds with their owners. (Although there is still some debate as to whether this is actually a preference for a person who provides safety and security.)

Although cats are known to show a preference for interacting with their owners over strangers, the social behaviour of cats can vary. The quality of human-to-cat interactions can also be influenced by the owners' gender, age and how much time they have available. Cats [appear to have the best relationship](#) with owners who are adult women. Differences in human behaviour may [help explain](#) the varying quality of these

relationships. For example, [men are thought to be more likely](#) to interact with cats while seated whereas woman tend to interact with cats at their level, normally on the floor.

Adults also usually call to a cat before interacting, allowing the cat to decide whether to respond or not. [Children, especially boys](#), tend to approach cats directly, which may not be tolerated well by individual cats. Interactions initiated by the cat itself tend to be longer than those initiated by the human.

The cat's sociability towards humans therefore ranges from "very independent" to "very attached". Where an individual cat lies on this spectrum is likely to be related to genes and previous learning experiences – that familiar mixture of nature and nurture. For example, feral kittens who have positive experiences with several different people in their early developmental stage (before six or seven weeks of age) are more likely to respond well to handling and become satisfying "good" pets than feral kittens which are first handled after the end of this period.

Having kittens

[According to research](#), paternal friendliness, as well as socialisation to people, affects responses to people throughout a cat's life. Kittens with friendly fathers and which have been socialised were shown to be more friendly. Kittens of friendly fathers that had not been socialised were less so. They were also more friendly than kittens that had been socialised to people but had unfriendly fathers. Breed may also influence how friendly cats are to people. Owners of Siamese and Persians [report higher levels of affection](#) than owners of non-pedigree cats, for example.

Toys, food and scents

Recent [research](#) has attempted to further investigate cat sociability by comparing their preferences for interacting with people to their preferences for food, toys and scents. The authors found similar numbers of cats that preferred human interaction to those who preferred food.

Significantly lower numbers of cats preferred toys and scents. The preference of some cats for playing or petting interactions with people over food is contrary to the age-old belief that people are just cats' servants, who only tolerate people because they provide food. This view is also [disputed by findings](#) that providing food in the absence of other social interactions from the human carer, such as speaking or stroking, cannot maintain a social bond.

So, are domestic [cats](#) aloof? There is no easy answer to this. Cats have the capacity to be very affectionate towards their owners and form significant bonds. But this largely depends on their genetic predispositions and early life experiences with [people](#).

Owner demographics and cat-directed behaviour will also influence the quality of cat-owner interactions and relationships. The degree of aloofness in the domestic cat is likely to be very individual. Potential [owners](#) should get to know a cat well before taking it into their home as a companion and respecting the cat's choice to interact.

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