

# The Secret to Getting Your Cat's Attention

While dogs will respond when either their owners or strangers speak directly to them, cats are wired much differently. But that doesn't mean your kitty isn't interested in communicating with you. Try what these researchers discovered and get ready for a different response.

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- The results of a recent study suggest that indoor-only cats react to their owner's "kitty voices" (high-pitched voices), but not necessarily their normal voices; they show
- The same cats showed little to no response to the voices of strangers, even their "kitty voices"
- Previous research on feline communication with humans suggests that cats try to communicate with us to solicit our help when needed; however, how attentive the person is to the cat at the time determines the cat's communication strategy
- When the cats in the study needed a caregiver's help to access a treat in a closed container, they were more likely to try to engage the caregivers who were paying attention to them

The results of a recent study suggest that cats react to their owner's voices — especially when we speak in a high-pitched "kitty voice" — but not to the voices of strangers.<sup>1</sup>

Whereas dogs respond when both their owners and strangers speak directly to them, cats seem to put everyone but their human on ignore. According to lead study author Charlotte de Mouzon at the University Paris Nanterre in France, this suggests that cats and their owners bond through their own unique form of communication.<sup>2</sup>

## Cats Tend to React Only to Their Owner's 'Kitty Voice'

For their study, de Mouzon and her colleagues recruited 16 cats (9 males and 7 females) who lived in studio apartments as either the only pet with a female owner, or in pairs with a heterosexual couple. All the humans in the study were veterinary students at the National Veterinary School in Alfort, near Paris; the kitties ranged in age from 8 months to 2 years old.

The owners were asked to use a high-pitched voice to call their cats by name, and also to say phrases (in French) such as, "Do you want to play?", "Do you want to eat?", "See you later!", and "How are you?" The pet owners then repeated the same phrases to humans using their normal voice.

The researchers recorded all this, along with the voices of 16 women not known to the cats, saying the same 4 phrases to humans, and to the cats via video in de Mouzon's laboratory.

The recordings were then played to the cats in their own homes, with their humans present but not interacting with them. Interestingly, when the cats heard their owners' "kitty voices," they tended to stop what they were doing and begin doing something else, for example, looking around, moving their ears and tails, or becoming very still. They were noticeably less responsive when their owners used their normal voices.

However, when they heard the strangers speak to them in their "kitty voices," calling them by name and enticing them to play or eat, the cats pretty much ignored them. According to de Mouzon, that could be because all 16 were exclusively indoor cats with little to no interaction with strangers. She believes the findings are further evidence that cats have considerable social cognitive skills and are "sensitive and communicative individuals."

*"We know that they react to this kind of speech and it's a good way for cats to know that we're addressing them," says de Mouzon. "So, we should feel confident about speaking to our cats with this kind of 'baby talk.'"*<sup>3</sup>

## **The Secret to Getting Your Cat's Attention**

According to a 2021 study,<sup>4</sup> cats may be better at "reading the room" than was previously thought, by scrutinizing the behavior of their humans. While feline family members obviously don't bark or paw at us to get our attention like dogs often do, they seem to have their own methods for soliciting human help.

Interestingly, the researchers found that how cats go about asking for help depends on the behavior of the humans involved. Said another way, cats adjust the way they ask for attention based on the attentional state of the person they're asking. This discredits the long-held assumption that cats have neither much interest in nor the ability to communicate with their humans

For the study, the cats were given a puzzle they could solve (an easy-to-reach treat in a container with a loose lid), and an unsolvable puzzle (a treat in a closed container). Also present in the room was either an attentive or inattentive caregiver.

The researchers observed that when the cats were able to easily obtain the treat in the solvable task, they didn't involve the human. However, when presented with the treat in the closed container, they performed certain behaviors to communicate their conundrum to the human. For example, they would repeatedly look at the treat and then at the person in a bid to get their attention and help.

Even more interesting is that the cats would change up their behaviors depending on how available they perceived the caregiver to be. When the person was looking at them and paying attention, the cats were also more engaged — for example, they looked to the person sooner and approached the treat container more often. When the caregiver wasn't paying attention, the cats adjusted their behavior accordingly.

These cognitive abilities are considered by scientists to be sophisticated and were thought to be used by dogs, but not cats.

*"A key part of any relationship is communication, and this study shows that cats are perhaps better communicators than we've given them credit for," said project leader François Martin, MA, PhD. "The more attentive a cat owner is, the more engaged their cat will be in return, making their relationship stronger."*<sup>5</sup>

This may be an important distinction. Whereas many dogs will do “whatever it takes” to get their human’s attention and help if they need it, cats naturally tend to be less assertive. This means that as often as possible, we need to reassure our kitties that we’re present and available to them if they need us.

Having said that, it’s also important to recognize that your cat may choose to ignore you, regardless of how present and reassuring you are!

## Cats Prefer to Interact With Us on Their Own Terms

If you happen to have both a dog and a cat in the family, you’ve no doubt noticed the difference in their reactions when you call them by name. If your canine companion isn’t focused on something more interesting (such as eating), chances are she’ll respond almost immediately when you call her because there could be food or a treat involved, a walk, a nice petting session or something equally delightful.

However, when you say your cat’s name, you probably get a distinctly different response or often, no response at all. Does my cat not recognize his name, you may wonder to yourself, or is he simply ignoring me?

A team of university scientists in Tokyo decided to study cats' ability to understand human voices similar to the way dogs, parrots, apes and dolphins are able to understand certain words. However, compared to those highly social species, “... cats are not so social,” observes lead study author Atsuko Saito, Ph.D., a psychologist at Tokyo’s Sophia University. “Cats interact with us when they want.”<sup>6</sup>

Interestingly, learning more about simple social behaviors in cats such as name recognition may help researchers understand more about how humans became social. According to ScienceDaily:

*“Both humans and cats have evolved through the process of self-domestication, where the population rewards certain traits that then become increasingly common in future generations.”<sup>7</sup>*

Past research with cats has revealed they can read human gestures to find hidden food, recognize their human’s voice, and beg for food when someone looks at them and says their name.<sup>8</sup> According to Saito, these three behaviors suggest cats know their names.

*“I think many cat owners feel that cats know their names,” Saito told ScienceNews magazine,<sup>9</sup> but until now, there was no scientific evidence to back that up.*

## Sources and References

<sup>1</sup> [De Mouzon, C. et al. Animal Cognition, October 25, 2022](#)

<sup>2, 3</sup> [NewScientist, October 25, 2022](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Zhang, L. et al. Animal Cognition, Volume 24, pages 1109–1119 \(2021\)](#)

<sup>5</sup> [PetfoodIndustry.com, November 19, 2021](#)

<sup>6, 7</sup> [ScienceDaily, April 8, 2019](#)

<sup>8</sup> [National Geographic, April 4, 2019](#)

<sup>9</sup> [ScienceNews, Vol. 195, No. 9, May 11, 2019, p. 5](#)

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