

Appendix 17

Approaching, Stroking and Picking Up

How a cat is initially approached and handled, especially by someone they do not know well, can influence how the cat regards that person and what form and amount of physical interaction they are likely to feel happy with, although there will always be some degree of individual variation.

The Approach

It always best to allow the cat to feel in control of the situation and give him the option to approach and interact with you if he wants to. It is never a good idea to force interactions on him. However, you may need to decrease your distance from the cat and then encourage him towards you.

- If you need to decrease your distance from the cat do so calmly and slowly, avoiding fast or sudden movements.
- Keep some distance so that the cat has the option to approach you if he wants to.
- Avoid wearing strong perfume, as this may discourage the cat from approaching you, especially if you have scent on your hands.
- Avoid leaning over or reaching down to the cat. You will appear less threatening and the cat will be more likely to want to approach you if you get down to his level (Fig. A17.1).
- Avoid prolonged direct eye contact, especially if the cat is nervous. Position your body at an angle rather than directly facing the cat, so that you appear less threatening.
- Talk to the cat using a soft, calm and measured voice.
- Avoid loud, abrupt or shhh sounds that the cat may perceived as threatening (such noises may sound similar to another cat hissing).
- Use a ‘slow eye blink’, as follows:
 - When the cat looks towards you, close your eyes slowly and keep them partially closed for a couple of seconds.
- Offer the cat the back of your hand to sniff, before attempting to touch the cat.

If the cat moves away or shows no sign of wanting to be stroked, i.e. by pushing his head towards your hand or rubbing against you, then it is best to leave him alone. If he does show signs of wanting to be stroked do so as follows:

- Stroke gently under his chin and along the side of his face.
- Do this for no more than a few seconds then stop, but keep your hand close to his face, giving him the option to continue with the interaction (by pushing his head towards your hand) or not. Leave him alone if he moves away or does not push his head towards you.



Fig. A17.1. Avoid leaning over or reaching down to the cat. Try to approach on the same level as the cat and offer the cat your hand to sniff.

- Speak to the cat while stroking, keeping your voice calm, soft and relaxed.
- As the cat becomes more relaxed, try stroking other areas of his body, although always start by stroking around the face and under the chin. Cats vary as to where they like, or will accept being touched or stroked, so this can be a matter of trial and error. However, many cats do not like to be touched, especially by a stranger, on the feet or belly.

A cat may perform what is known as a ‘social roll’ whereby the cat rolls on his back while stretching and opening the claws. This should not be interpreted as a request by the cat to have his ‘tummy rubbed’, as the cat may want to play and not be fussed. Also, trying to touch the cat’s belly could be considered threatening by some cats and provoke an aggressive defensive reaction.

Immediately stop stroking and move away if the cat shows any of the following behaviours:

- Dilated pupils.
- Swishing tail.
- Swiping at you or pushing your hand away.
- Biting.
- Twitching skin.
- Hissing or growling.
- Backing off or moving away.
- Ears flattened to the side or back.

Picking the Cat Up

Avoid picking the cat up unless it is absolutely necessary to do so, or if you are certain that the cat wants to be picked up (although it can be easy to misinterpret such signals unless you know the cat well).

If you do need to pick the cat up:

- Never pick the cat up by the scruff of the neck. This can be painful and frightening for the cat and may produce a defensive and aggressive reaction.

- Ensure that the cat is well supported underneath; do not ‘dangle’ the cat by only holding it around the chest.
- If the cat shows any sign of wanting to be released, do so immediately; do not restrain the cat.
- It is better to allow and encourage the cat to come to you and to jump up onto your lap, rather than attempting to force the cat into any form of physical interaction or restraint.

I recommend that you also watch the following videos produced by International Cat Care:

Approaching a cat

How to touch and stroke a cat

Things to avoid when handling a cat

These videos can be accessed via the following link: <https://icatcare.org/advice/cat-handling-videos> or via the iCatCare YouTube page: <https://m.youtube.com/user/iCatCare>

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