

Why Cats Naturally Like to be Petted

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Cats can vary significantly in their disposition from scratch-your-eyes-out meanness to the gentle ones. Over my lifetime, I experienced the full range.

When I was young and in the desert valley of China Lake, California, I went up to a Coke machine and dropped in a quarter. Out came a Coke and a small kitten. I thought that was weird. So I dropped in another quarter and out came a Coke and another small kitten. I gave the black kitten away and kept the yellow one. It was my coca-cola cat. Over the years it grew to be a large cat, about two or three times the size of a normal cat. It would go out at night and explore the neighborhood. Eventually it tangled with coyotes and came out the loser. It crawled back home slashed to pieces. I took it down to the basement and found a box and lined it with rags and placed him there in peace and quiet. Every day I would check up on him and pet him a little. Over the next week he healed up well and then was back on his feet exploring. Cats can heal if they are given a little peace and quiet and a little love.

A few years ago, I took a barn cat. (Reminder never do that again!) The kitten was wild. I gave it a couple days to get use to me before I approached it to gently pick it up and pet it. As I lifted the kitten up, its eyes flared, it turned its head 180 degrees around like in a demonic movie and then bit. This was not a normal bite but one that bit to the bone.

In the country, it is normal to keep one outdoor cat and one outdoor dog to keep the wild creatures at bay. Although there is the old saying about “fighting like cats and dogs”, the two animals are quite compatible provided one follows a few simple guidelines. The first is that they must be separated during feeding. Otherwise a war will ensue. I place the cat bowl up high where the dog cannot get to it. The other guideline is control the introductory period. Dogs like to smell. It is important to let the dog smell the kitten with the kitten calm. This is difficult to arrange because kittens can quickly go into the attack mode when a dog nears. It may take several attempts to achieve this. I pet the cat to keep it calm and then try to control both pets at the same time. Most times I only receive a few scratches for the trouble but then there is peace in the pet family.

Sometimes this arrangement between cats and dogs can take a strange twists. We had an Irish Setter and a cat that were very friendly. They would cuttle together at night to keep warm. The Irish Setter was a pointer and when he spotted a bird the setter would stand up and point. The cat would jump on the back of the dog and point also.

We had a female boxer and a young kitten. The two grew to be fairly close. The kitten would suckle on the dog. The boxer didn't seem to mind. Perhaps it was her maternal instincts at work.

The best kitten I ever had in my whole life was a polydactyl. It was like one of the Ernest Hemingway cats, part Maine Coon. It had six claws on each of its forepaws. As a kitten the paws were huge. The kitten was extremely lovable and extremely fearless. I remember when our dog approached it for the first time, the kitten just sat there. It didn't show an ounce of fear. The dog got a little too close and the kitten took one swipe and the dog fled in severe pain.

Kittens soon learn that trees are one of their best friends when it comes to their survival. If danger presents itself, a kitten can approach the nearest tree, dig its sharp claws into the bark and pull itself high up into the tree for safety.

City folks tend to pass by in the night and drop off unwanted kittens along the side of the road and drive away. The kittens must fend for themselves. I suspect most do not survive. If they are lucky, they might find a barn and become a barn orphan.

Well enough of this digression and back to the main point of this paper "why cats naturally like to be petted." A few months ago we visited a friend and took one of their new kittens home with us. I looked over the litter and found one that was not afraid of me, that enjoyed to be held and purred when I petted it and I decided this one would do. My granddaughter named the kitten "Cinder" after "Cinderella". I poured a bowl of milk and gave it to the kitten to drink. The kitten drank a couple licks and then stopped and approached me and waited. I petted it a couple times and then it went back and drank a couple licks of milk and then stopped and approached me and waited. It refused to go back and drink the rest of the milk until I petted it each time. This ritual went on for ten minutes. I thought this is strange; it must be a defective cat.

Several weeks went by and then the answer to this mystery came to me. When a litter of kittens are born into this world. The mother cat lays down and feeds them. They suckle on her many tits. Its a frenzy feeding time as each little kitten fights for a spot. In the beginning their eyes are not even open and they look like little blind mole rats. The mother cat licks each one clean during the feeding. This is a period of intense mother cat - kitten bonding. In the minds of the little kittens, they receive both nourishment and affection, in equal measure. Therefore my kitten wanted both in equal measure both nourishment of milk and affection. Petting was the closes sensation that emulated licking the kitten clean. That is the reason why cats naturally like to be petted.

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