Fabulous Felines

**Lesson 2: Grades K-3**

# How to Speak “Cat”

**Curriculum Connections, Standards addressed:**

**Academic Goals:**  Academic Goals: 1.5, 1.10, 2.3, 4.6, 4.7

**Knowledge Goals:** Communication Arts: 1, 4, 6; Science: 3; Health/Physical Education: 5

**Objective:** To interpret feline verbal and non-verbal communication and to understand warning signs to avoid cat scratches/bites.

**Common Core-Aligned Activities:**

**SL.3-4.1c—Pose and respond to specific questions and make comments that contribute to the discussion and link to remarks of others.**

Our feline friends have been our companions for over 5,000 years! Since we domesticated them, we have made them dependent on us for their care. What does domesticate mean? How has it affected cats? Us? How does their survival depend on us?

**W.K-2.3—Use a combination of drawing, dictating and writing to narrate a single event or several loosely linked events.**

Ask students to imagine themselves as a cat, seeking a safe place to live and trying to communicate these messages to humans. Ask them to describe, draw or write about their plight.

**Character Concepts:** Respect

Treat our feline friends with the respect they deserve. To do this, pay attention to the language signals they are using. It is important to realize they have needs and feelings and are trying to convey these messages to you through their actions and voice. Be a voice for them and show them respect!

**STEM initiatives: Thinking critically in the connections to Science, Technology, Engineering and Math**

**2-LS2-1**—Events have causes that generate observable patterns.

What differences and similarities can your students observe in the behavior and communication patterns of cats? Do all cats communicate in the same manner? How do pet cats compare to their larger, wild “relatives” such as tigers and lions? What causes trigger certain responses?

**Materials Needed:**

* Pencils
* Paper or poster board
* Crayons, colored pencils, markers
* DOWNLOAD Handout: “What is This Cat Telling You?”
* DOWNLOAD Handout: “Kindness Check Off”

**Method:** Today we’re going to learn how cats talk to us. Learning what cats are “saying” is important. It can help us understand how they are feeling. It can also help us predict their behavior. Your cat is talking all the time. Are you ready to learn this fascinating language?

Ask the children how they let others know what they are thinking or feeling. Usual responses include talking, writing, and sign language. Believe it or not, animals and people have very similar ways of expressing their thoughts and feelings.

*Speaking*

Can cats speak the way we do using words? No! But they can speak using sounds. Most cats can make at least 16 different sounds! What are some sounds cats make? Ask students to practice a meow, purr, growl, and hiss. What is the meaning of each of these sounds? A purr usually means “I’m happy and relaxed.” A cat can use several different meows to make commands (“Feed me!”), make a request (“Please pet me”), and make a complaint (“I accidentally got locked in the closet – I don’t like it in here!”). Cats use the growl and the hiss as warning signals to tell cats and people to stay away or back off. If a cat growls or hisses at you, leave the cat alone or a bite or scratch may follow.

*Body talk*

Cats also use their bodies to express themselves. People talk with their bodies, too. For example, if I shrug my shoulders, what does that mean? It usually means, “I don’t know.” Choose a few volunteers to act out different emotions using only their bodies. Show how we look when we are happy, mad, sad, and surprised. Ask the rest of the class to guess what emotion the actor is expressing.

Felines use their ears, tails, eyes, and body posture (the way they stand, sit, or lay) to “talk.” Most of the time they use their bodies and sounds together to tell you something.

Distribute the “What is This Cat Telling You?” handout to each student. As a class, look at each cat. Examine and discuss what is happening in each picture. Think about:

1. The cat’s body language – look at each part of the body and what it’s doing.
2. What sound the cat might make.
3. What the cat is feeling.
4. If the cat is safe to approach, touch, and/or pet. Why or why not?

Next, write a simple sentence under each picture to describe each cat. After completing the handout, look at the “Answer Sheet.” Are you fluent in “cat?” The more you understand something, the more you appreciate it. Cats are wonderful creatures when you get to know them. Take a few minutes every day to talk to your cat!

*A few more tips to stay safe with cats*

Do you have a cat at home or regularly visit with a neighbor’s, friend’s, or relative’s cat? If you spend time with cats, you should know there are some things that may upset cats and cause them to bite or scratch. Remember, how you act can determine a cat’s reaction.

\*Make your cat a part of the family. A cat who receives little attention from people is more likely to bite or scratch. So spend some time with your cat each day playing gently or relaxing together.

\*Leave your cat alone when she is eating or using the litterbox.

\*If your cat has babies, be careful. Mother cats protect their young. (Pet overpopulation is another topic we love to discuss!)

\*Leave your cat alone when he is sleeping. Pets need some alone time each day. Put a special bed in a quiet corner of the house. Remember, cats sleep an average of 16 hours a day.

\*Ask mom or dad to keep kitty healthy. Take your cat to the veterinarian every year for a check-up and shots. If a cat is sick or in pain, he may bite or scratch.

\*Always ask the owner’s permission before petting a cat that is not yours.

\*Most importantly, treat your cat and all animals with kindness and respect. Remember, pets have feelings just like we do. Treat them as you would want to be treated. Never pull a pet’s hair, tail, or ears. Don’t bite, kick, or hit a pet. Don’t chase, tease, or play rough games with pets.

Let’s practice treating pets gently. Using stuffed animals, demonstrate to students how to pet and touch animals. Remind them that our pets at home aren’t like stuffed animals at all. They have feelings and will hurt just like we would if we were kicked, hit, or tugged on. Allow students time to practice stroking and touching the stuffed animals. This is a good time to talk to them about using quiet, inside voices when around pets. Explain that pets may become upset or frightened if the children yell and scream around them.

Distribute the “Kindness Check Off” to reinforce this lesson.

**Call to Action:** Divide students into groups. Copy and cut the four individual pictures of cats from the “What is This Cat Telling You?” handout. Use a clean copy that does not have answers provided. Make enough copies so that each group has a set of these four “cat flash cards.” Allow each group some time to use the flash cards to quiz each other on cat language.

Have each student draw a poster of one tip for staying safe with cats. Display for other students to see.

Ask each student to tell one friend or family member what he or she has learned about cat communication and safety.

**Related Reading:**

*How to Talk to Your Cat*, Jean Craighead George, 2000 Harpercollins Juvenile Books

Find out what your cat is really saying – and talk back! Learn through words and photos how to communicate with that ever-lovable animal – the cat. Ages 7 and up.

Web sites: Visit our section entitled *Recommended Web Links* for animal-related web sites.