**FABULOUS FELINES**

**LESSON 4: Grades 4-6**

**LEARNING TO SPEAK “CAT”**

**Curriculum Connections, Standards addressed:**

**Academic Goals:** 1.2, 1.5, 1.6, 1.7, 1.8, 2.1, 2.3, 3.1, 3.3, 3.5, 4.1

**Knowledge Goals:** Communication Arts: 3, 5, 7; Science: 4,7

**Objective:** To teach students about the unique manner in which cats communicate with each other, other species of animals and with human beings. How did this form of communication evolve with domestication of cats as household pets and companions to humans?

**Common Core-Aligned Activities:**

**W..5.3—Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences:** Invite students to research cat body language and cat interaction with their own species. After they have collected the information, have them write a narrative describing an imagined encounter between two homeless cats in a shelter. What might these cats be saying to each other regarding their circumstances? How can they ask for help? What might the outcome of their lives be if their previous owners had been responsible for them for their entire lives?

**SL.5.1—Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly:** Ask students to discuss the plight of homeless cats in your community. What risks do they face? What can we do to help them? How can we “speak” for those that have no voice? How can we advocate for homeless animals, in this case specifically for cats, who may be considered a nuisance or unwanted? Create a community public awareness campaign that includes positive steps to solving the issue of too many cats and not enough homes.

**Character Concepts:** Responsibility, Caring

**Responsibility:** Following the ‘golden rule’ to treat another being as you would want to be treated. This includes providing the essentials of a healthy existence, especially for animals that can’t speak for themselves.

**Caring:** Being kind to creatures. Being compassionate and showing you are concerned for their well-being. Providing the necessities to create a healthy and enriching environment for your pet.

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

**5-PSI-2—**Science assumes consistent patterns in natural systems. A cat is truly a natural system. What can you observe and ascertain from a cat’s natural behavior? How does this behavior change to address different forces it encounters? (example: when an unfamiliar cat or dog enters his space) What does a cat do to adapt to its environment?

**5-PS2-1—**What cause and effect patterns can you observe in the behavior of cats? Chart or graph your results.

**Materials Needed:**

* Pencils
* Poster Board
* Markers, crayons, or colored pencils

## DOWNLOAD Handout: “What is This Cat Telling You?”

* DOWNLOAD Handout: “Reading Your Cat’s Body Language”

**Method:** Today we’re going to talk about how cats communicate with 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 communicating. The two most common ways people and animals communicate is verbally and non-verbally.

Let’s talk about verbal communication first. Humans speak in words, but cats speak in sounds. The average cat can make at least 16 different sounds, including purring, howling, hissing, and meowing. Ask students to imitate each of these sounds. The subtle differences in sound allow the cat to communicate his needs to human companions; he can make commands, as well as requests and complaints. Some sounds are reserved primarily for communication between cats. A cat uses the “hiss” and the “growl” as a warning signal to cats and people to stay away or back off. If you hear this, leave the cat alone or a scratch or bite may follow!

Cats use something called “body language” in conjunction with sound to express themselves fully. People use this, too. For example, if I shrug my shoulders, what does that mean? Choose a few volunteers to demonstrate different emotions that people communicate non-verbally. Act out happy, mad, sad, and surprised without talking. Have the rest of the class guess the emotion.

Felines are experts at non-verbal communication, using their ears, tail, eyes, body posture, and scent glands to “talk.”

**Ears:** A cat’s ears do more than just hear. The cat’s outer ear, the portion that points up, is the pinna. Cats have 30 muscles in each outer ear. They can rotate this area up to 180 degrees. These muscles allow cats to move their ears in different directions at the same time. The pinna locates and concentrates sounds down into the ear canal. This allows cats to hear even the faintest of squeaks, peeps, or rustling noises. But, the pinna also move according to a cat’s mood. For example, if a cat is interested in the action going on around him, his ears will stand straight and alert.

**Tail:** The tail is an extension of a cat’s backbone. It helps balance a cat’s body. A cat’s tail can help them climb, walk along a chair back, or tiptoe across tall shelves. The tail also indicates a cat’s moods and thoughts. For example, severely agitated cats will move their tails quickly back and forth, a clear warning signal to leave him alone. Watch out – if not heeded, this could be followed by a scratch!

**Eyes:** A cat’s eyes are extraordinary. Cats can see six times better in the dark than humans. They can also use their eyes to express emotion. If the eyes are staring, look out. This is a challenge.

**Body posture:** The way your cat stands says a lot. If he positions his body low to the ground and starts sneaking around, he’s stalking his prey. Cats love to “catch” toes, toys, and just about anything that moves.

**Scent glands:** Felines communicate with other cats through scent glands. These special glands located strategically throughout the cat’s body release aromatic markers called pheromones. Cats rub on things and leave their scent behind to help establish and maintain their territory. These glands are found on a cat’s face, shoulders, neck, rump, anal sacs, and toes. Your cat may rub on you to proclaim to all other cats that you belong to him!

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

1. The cat’s body language - the ears, tail, eyes, and body posture.
2. From the body language, can you guess what sound the cat might make?
3. What is the cat feeling?
4. Is the cat safe to approach, touch, and/or pet? Why or why not?
5. 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?” Find out more from the “Reading Your Cat’s Body Language” sheet. 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!

You really understand cats. To show that you do, write a story from a cat’s point of view. Imagine what a cat would say to you and how he would say it.

**Call to Action:** Now that your students are expert speakers of “cat” prepare them to teach others the language. Divide the students into groups. Each group will utilize their feline pictures from the “What is This Cat Telling You?” handout. After cutting each picture out individually and enlarging it on a copier, paste it on a large piece of poster board. Students may also wish to color them. These are now visual aids. Arrange to visit classrooms for younger students to teach them this fascinating language. Help younger students learn to appreciate cats and keep them safe from scratches and bites by recognizing warning signs.

## **Related Reading:**

## *How to Talk to Your Cat*, Jean Craighead George, 2000 Harper Collins 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.