



Your kitty may be a member of the family, but that doesn't mean she can find happiness living just like us.

One out of four cat owners see their beloved feline pets much in the same way that they see their human children.

THROUGH YOUR EYES

How to Give Your Cat a Cat's Life

Is your cat a fur baby, a paw pal or a hunter in your midst? Seeing your cat for the feline she is can multiply her happiness in your home.

BY JILL NEIMARK

We all love our pet cats, but the way in which we love them differs. Now new research reveals that the distinctions in the way cat owners view their pets have a powerful ripple effect. Those differences shape how humans treat their feline companions—and how they may misperceive their cats' needs and cues.

Take, for example, a pretty orange tabby named Luna. In 2015, the cat became an overnight sensation, gaining thousands of fans after she went viral on Instagram and Reddit and was written up in *People* magazine. Luna had been rescued from the side of a road at 3 weeks and her Latino family loved her deeply. When Luna turned 15 years old they threw her a quinceañera—the coming-of-age party that's a

traditional celebration of a 15-year-old girl's transition into womanhood. Luna got a pink gown, a tiara, 12 guests singing her "Happy Birthday" and a traditional cake (along with her favorite tuna treats). "She's not just an ordinary cat," owner Brigitte Olavarria explained to the *Huffington Post*. "She's a member of our family."

The sentiment is common, but is treating your cat companions like a human child good for them? Maybe not, says cat behaviorist Esther Bouma, who, along with her colleague Marsha Reijgwart, runs Purr Doctors, a cat behavior consulting service in the Netherlands. "If you anthropomorphize an animal too much, and project human traits onto them," says Bouma, "you may overlook their natural behaviors and needs."

TAKING A NEW LOOK AT THE CAT-HUMAN BOND

The four main ways humans view their furry felines are as children, friends, family members or just plain pets. To find out how those four ways influence a cat's treatment, Bouma, Reijwart and a third colleague surveyed 1,800 cat owners. The results, published in 2021 in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, shed new light on the cat-human bond.

Bouma and Reijwart looked at everything from how cat owners characterize their pets, to whether the cats were pedigreed or simple house cats, whether the cat lived with a single human or in a family with children, and details about owners such as education, age and gender. Finally, they looked at how owners viewed their pets' role in their lives. Then they examined how owners' attitudes affected their pets' access to the great outdoors, care when owners were gone and access to the bedroom and even the bed itself.

Some of the answers may surprise you. It turns out that half of owners see their cat as a full-fledged member of the family. One out of every four cat owners view their felines as one of their children. About 14% see their cats as pets, and a mere 7% view them as friends.

Those differences have a striking influence on how owners care for their beloved furballs. And each view has different benefits and occasional downsides, according to Reijwart. But overall, she says, "Basic cat needs are all the same, and those needs are independent of a cat's personality"—or how their human sees their family role.

WHEN YOU THINK YOUR CAT IS YOUR CHILD

In 2020, during the pandemic lockdown, a photo of actress Jennifer Garner went viral: She

SO ADORABLE

Seduced by a Baby Face

That round face and plaintive meow may convince you that kitty comes first.

One reason it can be hard not to see your cat as a baby comes down to her face. Humans have been selectively breeding cats (as well as some dogs) to have faces that are somewhat infant-like, flat and round with big eyes. According to Austrian zoologist Konrad Lorenz, infant features tap directly into our basic nurturing instincts. Pedigreed breeds such as Persian cats have round faces, bright eyes and lots of cuddly fluffy fur. "In our study," says stress physiologist Esther Bouma, "owners who saw their cats as children more often owned pedigreed animals with exactly that look."

Unfortunately, though, cats with baby faces can mislead humans by their appearance. A 2020 study by British zoologist Mark James Farnworth and colleagues, published in *Frontiers in Veterinary Science*, found these kinds of features tend to telegraph distress even when it's not present. The cats look to us like they might be in pain and vulnerable. That elicits extra nurturing and care from their human owners, even when the cat feels fine and might prefer to be more independent. "We don't even realize we are doing this," explains Bouma, and it could cause us to miss other cues.



This cat capitalizes on her baby-like features to seek treats from her human family.

Cats are happiest running through nature, not confined to a stroller—but sometimes we must protect our pets from human traffic or the wild world.





Adult cats can sleep and dream up to 18 hours a day. But where a cat sleeps in your home depends on how you see them.

As creatures more recently evolved from the wild, cats can be asleep, yet still alert enough to flee at the sound or smell of danger.

had purchased a special pet stroller and had taken her pet for a walk alongside her three children. Garner explained to Ellen DeGeneres that her cat was titillated by the whole experience. But does a creature descended from lions and tigers need a baby stroller to go outside?

There are pluses and minuses to viewing your cat as your child. Bouma and her colleagues found that pet owners who see their cats as children view them as loyal and empathetic, like trusted family members. They also feel their cats are dependent on them for love and care. And to a great extent that's true. But, Bouma says, it's important to remember how different a baby is from a cat. A baby is wholly dependent on its parents for food, closeness and warmth. Humans love to cuddle babies close and tight, but being held tight is threatening to a cat. (See "How to Help a Cat on Overload," page 22.) Cats may also be dependent on their owners, but it's likely if they were forced to go hungry, they could rely on their instinct and skill to hunt a mouse, rat or bird.

In this study, owners who saw their cats as children tended to be single, childless women under the age of 35 living alone and with more than one cat. They rarely left their furry friends in the care of others. It's possible, says Bouma, they filled their need to nurture by being a "cat mom" for the time being.

WHICH CATS GET TO SLEEP ON THE BED?

If a pet owner regards their cat as either a child or a friend, they usually allow them into the bedroom. Individuals who live alone, or have no children, are more likely to allow their cat to actually sleep on the bed with them. And if they see them as children they are less likely to give their cats unrestricted

outdoor access. (They're also likelier to own multiple cats.)

Restricting outdoor play, Bouma and Reijwart believe, may not be in the best interest of some cats—even though the risk cats present to birds and small mammals has caused many ethicists to insist they be kept indoors or allowed out only in a catio, where other animals are safe. Yet cats are descendants of solitary hunters, and their social skills are likely not as evolved as humans or dogs, who have evolved to live in groups.

For the cat herself, outdoor time could be best. "They like to hunt prey, especially at night, to scratch and trim their claws, and these are not needs you would find in a human baby or child," she notes.

Seeing cats as humans, she adds, restricted the animals most. Eight out of 10 owners who saw their cats as pets—literally, as animals—let them have access to the outdoors. Those owners were less likely to own a pedigree cat, and were often over the age of 55. Contrast that with the finding that fewer than half who saw their cats as friends or children allowed roaming outside. Only a fifth of cats seen as children were allowed free access to a cat flap. Some cats were restricted to a fenced garden, and a tiny portion were only allowed a balcony or patio.

Both Bouma and Reijwart own a cat and give full access to a cat flap activated only by the cat's microchip. That means no other cat can enter or exit the flap. The cats are also monitored by GPS. Giving cats free rein to roam like that may reveal a whole astonishing secret life. Bouma's cat, Sjorsz, "shocked us. He goes out four times a day and he goes a very long way, more than half a kilometer. He travels on the same streets at the same hours." Bouma explains this is because cats are territorial, and other cats may "own" a street at a certain hour. Cats try to avoid fights and injury, and

one way is by not encroaching on another cat's territory. Sjorsz's four treks take place between 4 and 6 a.m., 5 and 7 a.m., 4 and 5 p.m. and 10 and 11 p.m. every day. The rest of the day "he sleeps near us and cuddles with us."

Bouma wonders if he has other cat or human buddies in his favorite haunts, whether he even sneaks into houses with cat flaps and has a snack of kibble, or has a human friend. Her cat has a secret life as a solitary prowler and hunter like his ancestors. "I'll never really know where he goes on his journeys," she admits, "and that's OK."

THE ESSENTIAL CAT

The bottom line is, we need to see our cats for who they are. About 10 years ago while spending a month in south Georgia, my partner and I fostered a breathtaking black and white stray kitty. I nicknamed her Boo. We would keep our door open, and she would place a paw on the threshold, as if to possess us somehow. One morning, there was a dead bird on the doorstep. She was looking up at me with a slightly cocked head. "Look," I told my partner. "She wants us to know she can feed us too."

Nope, say Bouma and Reijwart. This is a classic example of attributing human motivations to cats. "Cats have a core territory," they explain, "where they rest, eat and clean themselves. Your house is their core territory." But since you're feeding them, they hunt for pleasure and out of instinct. They bring their prey back home to their territory, and drop it there to eat later, or to share it with you. But a present intended to show you how valuable they are or just because they love you? My interpretation was overly anthropomorphic, say the Purr Doctors. Apparently I was performing psychoanalysis on Boo.

"If you humanize your cats too much," says Reijwart, "you'll miss knowing them as they really are."



Cats need a place within the human home to call their own. Especially if your cat is shy or anxious around strangers, he needs a hiding spot.

WILD LIFE

How to Nurture Your Cat's Inner Lion

Bring the outside in for your stay-at-home cat.

Cats evolved as hunters and predators, but it isn't always feasible for the house cat to live that life today. These guidelines should help you compensate for the restriction by providing your cats with a touch of the wild and a sense of agency at home:

- Cats like to hunt for their food, so give them a challenge with a puzzle feeder, also known as a food toy. Food puzzles come in different designs. Some look like mazes, others are mice-shaped food toys. Introduce the puzzle with their favorite treats, then move on to their regular food. You can also craft simple challenges by putting bits of kibble into the compartments of ice trays, egg cartons, fruit boxes, toilet paper or paper towel cardboard tubes. And just tossing your cat a treat they have to catch or find can satisfy their hunting and chasing needs.

- You may think cats are easier than dogs, but lots of cat owners consult the Purr Doctors for cats that pee outside their litter box, scratch the furniture and are aggressive. One problem may be their life is too comfortable and they are actually frustrated. To simulate a more natural, wild environment, make sure your cat can climb to a high place (or places) in your home or apartment and rest there, surveying his or her territory. Provide your feline with varied

and interesting toys, a bed of her own and private time.

- If it's feasible, get a cat flap that allows her to go outdoors on her own schedule. Even if you fence in an area, she will still be able to connect with nature more freely than from behind a window. If you feel comfortable letting your cat roam freely, you may want to add a GPS tracker to her collar so you can see where she wanders and be sure she's OK.

- Give your cat the opportunity to be the control freak he was born to be. Purr Doctors' Marsha Reijwart's cat, Ties, knows if he sits in front of the cupboard where his toys are, she'll get them for him. If he jumps on a certain stool it means he wants attention, and she gives it. If he goes to his hiding place, she knows he wants to be left completely alone there. Your cat will choose his own "do not disturb" spot, she says, and you should respect it.



A puzzle feeder helps cats work for their food.