

Speak to Me!

Even if your cat doesn't know the words, the meaning is clear. Your tone of voice and body language convey much to your pet.

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The reason, Dodman says, is that cats don't have the highly evolved language centers we have. "Humans have been communicating with language for so long that [we've] actually evolved [to have] speech centers in the brain," Dodman says. "This specialized prefrontal cortex [region in the brain] allows us to decipher sounds and understand context. Cats haven't developed this sophistication, so when you start stringing words together, they don't understand the exact meaning." Keep Talking That doesn't mean you shouldn't bother to talk to your cat. "Cats benefit immensely from hearing you talk. Even if they don't understand the words, they understand the tone of your voice and your intention toward them," says feline behavior consultant Kate Gamble of Auburn, Calif. "When people go on and on to their cats, the cats get out of it what a pre-language child gets out of a mother talking to them, cuddling them, saying nice things with a smiling face and kind eyes," Dodman says. "Cats pick up on your mood largely based on your vocal intonations as well as your body language," he adds, likening this rudimentary understanding of language to the way we understand the contented purrs, animated meows or intense yowls of our cats, or even the way we understand people speaking another language. "If a French policeman stops your car and yells at you in quick choppy tones, you know he's upset," Dodman says. Positive vocalizations can help build a cat's self-esteem and tame undesirable behaviors, says feline behavior consultant Jackson Galaxy of Boulder, Colo. "Talking to your cat is a big part of playing and bonding with your cat. Negative tones also affect cats," says Galaxy, who used to perform shelter intake tests at the Humane Society of Boulder Valley. "I would speak in a loud, low voice, and some cats would become extremely agitated and upset. Others would be fine. They clearly reacted to the sound of the human voice in a positive or negative way, depending on their past experiences." Volunteers also read to feral cats as part of a socialization program. "The volunteers don't touch the cats," Galaxy says. "They read in a soft, sing-songy voice. Cats have to get used to a human voice before they get used to human touch, and this program was very effective."