

'Sociable Cat' is Not an Oxymoron



By Ruth Kava — March 27, 2017



Cat Providing Social Connection [1]

Yes, we know — dogs are warm and friendly and want nothing more than to spend time interacting with their human companions. Cats, on the other hand, have a chillier reputation. Supposedly they're independent, untrainable, and more attached to their homes than the people they share it with. Well, some recent research suggests that cats have been maligned — they like people more than we (and cat haters in particular) might think.

Dr. Kristyn R. Vitale Shreve from Oregon State University and colleagues assessed the preferences of cats from shelters and of those from households, because, they said, the belief that *Felis silvestris catus* is not a particularly sociable or trainable animal may be based on "a lack of knowledge of what stimuli cats prefer, and thus may be most motivated to work for." Their work will be published in the journal [Behavioural Processes](#) [2].

In the first part of their study, the investigators determined the preferences of their feline subjects on four categories of stimuli: human social interactions; food; toy; and scent. So for example in the scent category, a cat would have three scents to choose from — catnip, gerbil, or a strange cat — and the preference was determined by which one the subject contacted/interacted with for the longest period. Then, in the second part the investigation, the cats were shown their favorite stimulus from each category simultaneously, and the researchers recorded which one the animals chose to spend the most time with. So, for example a cat might be given a choice between a person sitting quietly (social interaction), a catnip-scented cloth, a small amount of favorite food, and a feather toy, if those were its preferred selections in each category.

There was no difference between the household cats and the shelter cats regarding the number of individuals preferring stimuli within each category or in the number of cats preferring each stimulus category in the final comparison. Thirty-eight cats in all provided data for the final comparison.

Overall, the authors found that social interaction was the most preferred stimulus, followed by food. Indeed, they noted

[W]e have found that 50% of cats tested preferred interaction with the social stimulus even though they had a direct choice between social interaction with a human and their other most preferred stimuli from the three other stimulus categories. Therefore, the idea that cats have not been domesticated long enough to show preference toward human interaction is not supported by these data.

While it is true that domestic cats, as well as their wild relative (excluding lions), tend to live relatively solitary lives, this study suggests that this may not be a strong preference — at least for our domesticated version.

What, one may ask, does this have to do with public health? Much research has pointed out that having a pet can ease the stresses of life (see [here](#) [3], for example), and this study certainly supports the concept that cats belong to that category as well. So if you're thinking along the lines of acquiring a pet for the health benefits it could supply — don't leave cats out of the mix because of their unwarranted reputation for unfriendliness.

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