

Dear Dr. Wise,

Question: Friends gave Katie, our seven-year-old daughter, a newly-weaned kitten. I said Katie could keep it partly because I thought it would be educational to let the kitten have a litter herself when she grows up. We have been reading about cats, but I still have some questions: why do cats purr and push their claws in and out; does it mean they are happy? Is meowing the same as talking? Also, how will we know when the cat is in heat and ready to breed?

Answer: Let me start with the purring, meowing and kneeding questions, Unfortunately, not much research has been done on animal communication, so information is limited.

Most cat behavior specialists, however, believe that purring and kneeding stem from a kitten's early experience nursing. The baby hears its contented mother purring and joins in and/or purrs itself in response. The sound is definitely one of contentment.

We believe that kneeding comes from the same source. The kitten kneeds its mother's breast as it nurses to stimulate the "letting down" of the milk. Even when mature, the cat continues purring and kneeding when it is content.

The cat's meow also is communicating. Like a baby's cry, a meow means different things. Sometimes the cat is saying it is hungry or that its water bowl is empty. It also can mean that the cat wants attention or that it's just being sociable.

A very distinctive meowing is one sign that a cat is in heat—that is, that it has come to a fertile period in its estrus cycle. The meow is relatively deep pitched and prolonged; it is more a moan than a meow.

A cat in heat also will writhe and roll in the floor, and wander with a kind of stomping rhythm through the house. Such behavior is the cat's instinctive way to attract a male cat.

You can confirm that your cat is in heat by scratching its back just in front of the tail. If the cat rises up on her toes and "dances," she is in heat, that is, she is fertile.

It is not uncommon for pet owners to allow their pets to produce kittens in order to provide some sex education for their children. However, I feel obliged to caution you. Such a move can add more unwanted kittens to the pet population even if you find "good" homes for each kitten. If your kittens were not available, their owners might otherwise adopt a kitten from an animal shelter thus saving it from euthanasia.

I know that is a tough statement to make, but the cat overpopulation is a tragic situation that is under publicized.

If you have a question about your pet, write to Dr. Wise, Indiana Veterinary Medical Association, 201 S. Capitol Ave, Ste. 405, Indianapolis, IN 46225 or www.invma.org

