



### Monitoring Cats for Signs of Social Stress and Incompatibility

Careful observation is required in the context of groups of cats because signs of social stress may appear deceptively subtle, despite high levels of FAS and poor welfare. Passive signs of stress and subtle posturing are especially common. Observers must carefully observe and take note of each cat on a daily basis. Recognize when social behavior is healthy and appropriate and when it is not, and act quickly to reassign cats when there are signs of conflicts and FAS.

Look for relaxed body postures (especially when cats are near one other) and displays of normal behaviors (comfortably moving about at will, changing locations, eating, sleeping restfully, grooming, playing, and affiliating with other cats). When cats are bonded, they often sleep together. And, they may rub and groom one another or play together. These behaviors indicate of social harmony.

Examples of passive signs of stress include social withdrawal, constant hiding, remaining sequestered in one place, feigning sleep, hypervigilance, poor appetite, and lack of grooming. Always remember to look for the “absence of behavior” as well as for behavior. Ask yourself, what should the cats be doing, and why might they not be doing it?

Below is a list of “red flag” behaviors: these behaviors may indicate unacceptable levels of social tension, conflict, and FAS among cats.

- Bullying (i.e., repeatedly staring at another cat, bothering another cat that clearly does not want to interact, ignoring avoidance signals)
  - Passive or covert aggression is common (assertive posturing, intense staring, blocking access to food, litter, and preferred resting areas)
- Spraying/ and other forms of territorial marking
- Inappropriate elimination (urinating or defecating out of the litter box)
- High ranking cats may control access to food/resources
  - Usually through intimidation, staring, posturing, threatening
  - Occasionally, through overt aggression (growling, hissing, combat)
- Low ranking cats may be sequestered on perches or on the floor and may display:
  - Signs of anxiety (facial and body tension, hypervigilance, fear-related postures)
  - Activity and social withdrawal, avoidance
  - Constant hiding
  - Feigning sleep
  - Reduction of normal maintenance behaviors such as eating, grooming or restful sleeping
  - Only coming out of hiding when people enter the room; while more assertive members of the group are preoccupied with human attention, a subordinate cat may discover this is a safe time to use the litter box or eat