

The Gentlest Need

At least once a day our old black cat comes to one of us in a way that we've all come to see as a special request. It does not mean he wants to be fed, or to be let out, or anything of that sort. His need is for something very different.

If you have a lap handy, he'll jump into it, if you don't, he's likely to stand there looking wistful until you make him one. Once in it, he begins to vibrate almost before you stroke his back, scratch his chin, and tell him over and over what a good kitty he is. Then his motors really rev up; he squirms to get comfortable; he "makes big hands." Every once in a while one of his purrs gets out of control and turns into a snort. He looks at you with wide-open eyes of adoration, and he gives you the cat's long, slow blink of ultimate trust.

After a while, little by little, he quiets down; if he senses that it's all right, he may stay in your lap for a cozy nap. But he is just as likely to hop down and stroll away about his business. Either way, he's all right.

Our daughter puts it simply: "Blackie needs to be purred."

In our household he isn't the only one who has that need. I share it, and so does my wife. We know the need isn't exclusive to any one age group. Still, because I am a schoolman as well as a parent, I associate it especially with youngsters, with their quick, impulsive need for a hug, a warm lap, a hand held out, a coverlet tucked in, not because anything's wrong, not because anything needs doing, just because that's the way they are.

There are a lot of things I'd like to do for all children. If I could do just one, it would be this: to guarantee every child, everywhere, one good purring every day.

Kids, like cats, need time to purr. □

Fred T. Wilhelms was Executive Secretary of ASCD from 1968-1971. He is retired now, at 1515 Ridgeway Rd., Lincoln, NE 68506.

Illustration by Donald Gates



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