



PAWS[®] CHICAGO

SHY & FEARFUL CATS

CONGRATULATIONS ON ADOPTING YOUR NEW FAMILY MEMBER!

There are several common reasons why cats develop fear-based responses. Some cats never got the opportunity to properly socialize with people, animals, or environments during key periods of their development. Other cats develop fear responses based on past experiences. Every cat is unique, and some cats are naturally more sensitive than others.

Fortunately, there are a number of techniques cat owners can employ to help fearful cats adjust to a new home setting and family.

Setting up a Safe Home Environment from Day One

Every cat should be introduced to their new home via a “safe room.” This is especially important when adopting a shy cat. Giving your new cat free reign over the entire household space can be very overwhelming for a fearful cat. Safe rooms help minimize the chances of your cat fleeing to a hiding spot that you cannot locate.



A cardboard box with comfortable bedding allows you to share space with your new cat without overwhelming him or making him feel threatened.

Your safe room can be a bathroom, bedroom, office, or any enclosed space that can contain all of your new cat's essential resources (e.g. litter box, bedding, food and water dishes, toys, and scratchers). Before letting your new cat out of the carrier, block off any areas that could serve as a potential “hiding spot” for the new kitty. Use boxes, crates, or storage containers to block off the cat's access to the underside of beds, bookcases, and dressers. Keep closet doors closed if they are too small for you to sit comfortably without overwhelming the cat. Block off the tops of cabinets if they are too high for you to interact with the cat.

Use cardboard boxes to create enclosures for your cat to feel secure in while still in the safe room. Add soft towels or blankets to the boxes and spray them with Feliway (about 30 minutes prior to use) to provide the cat with a comforting space that allows him to feel safe while you interact with him and work on building trust.

As your cat gains confidence and trust in his new family, he can gradually be introduced to other areas of the home.

USING SYNTHETIC PHEROMONES TO REDUCE STRESS

Synthetic feline pheromones mimic the naturally-produced feline pheromone that is released when a cat rubs the side of his face on furniture, walls, other cats, and people. Marking areas of the safe room with the spray can create feelings of calm and reduce stress and anxiety for some cats. If using the spray, spritz the walls of the safe room about eight inches off the ground (think cat height) daily, as well as the cat's bedding. Do not spray near the cat's litter box or food and water, and do not spray the cat with the product. A plug-in diffuser is also available. Feliway is a well-known synthetic pheromone available online and at most pet supply stores: <https://www.feliway.com/us/Buy>

Building a Positive Relationship with Your Shy/Fearful Cat

The key to building a positive relationship with a shy and fearful cat is patience. The amount of time it will take for your cat to adjust to a new home can vary. It's important not to push interactions with fearful cats before they are ready, or they may backtrack with their progress.

SPACE SHARING

Try to share space with your shy cat multiple times a day while he is adjusting to his new home. Initially, you may only be able to sit in the cat's presence without any direct contact to show that you are not a threat. Sitting on the floor and reading while ignoring the cat is one way to show him that your presence is not something to fear.

Never reach over the cat with your hands or tower above him when working on building trust. Sit on the ground near him or stand near his perch, but don't face directly toward him or maintain eye contact for more than a second or two. Speak in soft, soothing tones, and if he appears relaxed, allow him to smell your hand and pet the top of his head (no farther than the back of his neck) for 1-3 seconds. After that, stop to observe his body language. If he still appears relaxed and receptive to more pets, continue this a few more times before stopping the petting session. Offer him a few high-value treats or a teaspoon of his favorite canned food to end things on a high note.

LEARNING HOW TO RECOGNIZE SIGNS OF FEARFULNESS IN YOUR CAT

It can sometimes be difficult to ascertain a cat's mood. Your new cat won't be able to tell you he's scared or uncomfortable with words, but an understanding of feline body language can give cat owners insight into their cat's emotional state.

Signs of Fearfulness

- Tensed muscles
- Excessive lip licking
- Legs held directly under the body when lying down/body held low to the ground
- Tail wrapped tightly around the body, lashing back and forth quickly, or tucked between the back legs
- Fur standing on end or appearing puffed up
- Dilated pupils
- Ears held down and to the side (airplane ears)
- Head tucked closely into the body
- "Freezing"/no movement when approached
- Withdrawing from your hand when offered for pets
- Fleeing, hiding or backing into a corner when approached
- Low growls, hissing, or swiping when approached



If your cat displays the above signs, refrain from petting or attempting to directly handle the cat. Continue to share space with the cat, speak quietly with him, and offer treats once he appears more relaxed and calm.



Signs of that your cat is calm and relaxed

- Front legs stretched out if reclining or fully erect if upright
- Partially exposed belly if lying down (don't pet the belly)
- Fur lying flat against the body
- Tail and body are loose and relaxed
- Tail held upright when standing
- Pupils moderately dilated
- Eyes soft or half-closed
- Ears forward
- Leaning into your hands if offered for pets
- Kneading motions made with paws
- Purring or silent



DEVELOPING A BOND WITH FOOD

Staying with your cat during mealtimes is one way to show him that your presence brings with it good things. It may take some time and experimentation to find a food that your new cat will go bananas over. Purchase a variety of canned foods and treats to find your cat's favorite. Stay in the safe room with your cat during mealtimes, so he learns that you are the source of the food he loves.

Initially, you may have to sit on the opposite side of the room (or just outside the room) and not even look at the cat during mealtimes. Over time, move closer to the cat during feedings. If possible, do not leave food in the room when you aren't there, and keep a consistent schedule for mealtimes.

Once the cat is comfortable enough to eat near you consistently, you can try petting his head softly a few times while he is focused on the food. Practicing limited petting while your cat is focused on food can help shy cats become more receptive to pets and human contact over time.



If you are working with a kitten or an adult cat who has not eaten for over 24 hours, DO NOT WITHHOLD FOOD. Leave the kitten or cat with kibble to free-feed upon. Use high-value treats, canned food, or Gerber #2 baby food during interactions with the cat to build trust.

DEVELOPING A BOND WITH PLAY

As your cat becomes more relaxed in your company, try engaging him in play sessions a few times a day.

Engaging your cat in some form of structured play is a great way to channel your cat's energy and boost confidence in shy cats, as well as helping you and your new cat develop a bond. Structured or interactive play consists of using toys to mimic the prey species your cat would hunt for in the wild. Wand toys with feathers and long ribbons can be used to mimic the natural movements of rodents, snakes, or birds.

The following link takes you to a video on structured play from Cat Behavior Specialist Jackson Galaxy:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oqdnhtMYJ7Q>

Cats easily become bored with the same toy, so you will want a few different kinds of wand toys. These should be stored in a location that the cat cannot access, so they remain novel to him and as a safety precaution. If your cat seems to get bored playing with one toy after 5 minutes, you can try introducing a new toy to extend the play session.



SHY & FEARFUL CATS

Environmental Enrichment

Environmental enrichment is a great way to provide your cat with objects and activities that he can investigate, explore, and play with when you are unable to actively play with him. An enriched environment can keep your cat's mind and body active, which in turn, helps boost confidence.



Cat trees

Cat trees are great for exploration and viewing one's territory from a safe vantage point. Place near a window if possible.



Window perches

Window perches are excellent for lounging and watching exciting outdoor activities.



Cardboard boxes and paper bags

Hide treats and toys in cardboard boxes and paper bags (handles cut off) to encourage your cat to explore the environment in a fun and inexpensive way.



Stuffed toys and balls

Self-directed object play allows cats to practice their hunting skills independently. Have a variety of stuffed toys and balls around the home for your cat to investigate and explore.



Catnip

⚠ Catnip is tons of fun for many cats, but it could also overstimulate your cat. Avoid offering catnip to cats with a history of play aggression.



Electronic toys

Electronic toys mimic the movements of prey species, and encourage cats to practice their hunting skills independently.



Puzzle feeders

Puzzle feeders extend mealtime and provide mental enrichment for cats as they discover how to reach the food.

Short on cash? There's even a website that shows cat owners how to make their own puzzle feeders from everyday household objects:

<http://foodpuzzlesforcats.com/homemade-puzzles>



Pavlov's Cat

Pavlov's Cat is a puzzle feeder and scratching post in one! It reinforces using appropriate scratching surfaces by rewarding your cats with a treat or dry food every time they use the post.

If you are having difficulties building a relationship with your cat, please contact us at adoptions@pawschicago.org or emayes@pawschicago.org. We can direct you to someone who can help.