
Socializing Shy or Feral Cats

A Guide for Austin Pets Alive! Foster Parents and Adopters

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Helping People Help Pets

Working with a shy, under-socialized, feral, or traumatized adult cat



Think like a frightened cat. Allow her to be scared. Reset your clock to her needs.

What will you need?

Patience: A lot of patience is required to socialize feral cats. Each cat will come around at their own pace regardless of their age – although generally the younger socialize the fastest. You have to follow the cat at their own pace and don't expect too much too soon.

Routine: If you can, interact with the cat at the same time each day, so he begins to anticipate your visits. Cats feel more secure when they can predict their environment. They feel insecure and therefore are more likely to be aggressive when things happen unpredictably.

Frequency: Short, frequent visits work best in the first few weeks. A five minute session twice a day will do wonders. However if the cat can see and hear humans most of the time, that is ideal. For example a cage in a living room of a home is better than a quiet bedroom where the cat is rarely exposed to humans. If the cat is in a quiet area, leave a talk radio station on and place T-shirts with your smell in the cage.

Confinement: Confining the cat to a cage or small room with limited hiding spaces will greatly accelerate the taming process. A small room can be equipped with a cat tree so the cat can get up off the ground. Block off hiding places like under a bed because if the cat can retreat fully you can't initiate interactions. The cat should feel secure, so provide a cardboard box on it's side or a partially enclosed bed such as a kitty cube.

Isolation: It is important to isolate the cat from other cats, because feral cats will often bond strongly with other felines, and the result is that they have no need for human comfort. If you can separate them for a few weeks they will still retain their fondness for other cats when re-introduced. It's important that the cat starts to see humans as the source of food, comfort and love.

A step-by-step plan:

Day 1: Bringing Kitty Home

Once the cat is in your home, keep the cat in a very small area, such as a bathroom, because too large of an area will stress and frighten the cat. Make sure that this room is quiet and calm and that there are no other animals or small children in this room.

First, only visit the cat to take care of his/her personal needs such as food, water, and the litterbox. Again, food is a very big motivator for feral animals, so get the cat used to the fact that you are the one taking care of his needs. While you are taking care of the cat, feel free to talk to the cat very slowly and softly, this will also get the cat used to you and your voice. Always move slowly around the cat.

Week 1: Beginning to Build Trust

Once the cat seems comfortable with your presence, try sitting with him for a few hours a day. Don't try to touch the cat yet—just sit near and talk to him. Each time you visit, you can also try to sit closer and closer to the cat, being sure to pay attention to his signs. Remember that any time the cat gives you a signal to 'go away', do so. Never push. Let things go at the pace the cat chooses.

Week 2-3: Touching

Once he seems comfortable with you near, you can try to touch the cat. You may want to wear a long shirt or gloves just in case you get scratched or bitten. When you start, always move your hand slowly towards the cat and let the cat smell your hand before you touch him/her. If the cat seems calm enough you can try to pet the cat gently. Again, don't push things. Start slow, pet the cat for a minute or two the first day, and work your way up to more time. At any time, if the cat seems to be angry or scared, stop. And remember, most cats strongly dislike their paws and backsides/tails to be touched so try to stay away from those areas at first.

If the cat is resisting touch, you can try a few tricks: try to give the cat a little tuna or chicken baby food on a spoon before touching to coax the cat into trusting you, or tie a sock or a piece of clothing of yours (with your smell on it) around a stick and 'pet' the cat with it from a distance. This contact is a big step, so be patient.

Cats that are not ready to be touched: Try using a feather wand (sold as cat toys) or a stick with a piece of soft flannel wrapped around the end to touch the cat first. You can use Feliway on the feathers or fabric to help soothe the cat further. First, slowly move the stick towards the back of the cat's neck. Gently start to stroke the back of the neck and head. Rub the top of the head, avoid ticklish areas such as the sides. Over a few days, move your hand down the stick each time you use it when the cat relaxes so eventually your hand is right beside the cat when you are rubbing gently. Finally, you can start touching the cat with your own hand. Distract the cat with a toy or food while you reach your hand around behind his head to touch. Do not reach towards the cat's face with your hand, try to sneak your hand around behind so he think it is still the stick. Rub the back of the neck and head – don't touch any other areas yet. Once the cat is appearing to enjoy this you are well on your way!

Week 4: Holding

Once he/she can sustain long contacts and seems comfortable with your touch, you can try to hold the cat. You can start off by holding the cat for short periods of time and working your way up to longer 'hugs' and putting the cat on your lap.

If he/she allows this, and seems comfortable with you and the room, you may want to then try to show the cat other parts of the house or other animals. You may also want to try to get the cat to play.

Tips:

- Speak and move slowly and calmly and avoid high-pitched sounds
- Do not make sustained direct eye contact, look down and to the side
- Watch for body language signals and back off if the cat is warning you by growling, spitting or swishing tail
- Keep fingers and fist together when approaching the cat – spread fingers resemble unsheathed claws which is a sign of aggression to cats
- Feeding treats can be a good way to some cat's hearts. Others may become aggressive and try to "scare" the food out of you by lunging or spitting. In that case don't use treats, they don't work well for every cat! You can start by placing treats such as kibble, cooked deli meat, or small chunks of tuna at the front of the cage, Once the cat is comfortable eating it with you watching, try to get her to eat while your hand remains nearby. Try rubbing him with the stick while he eats the treat, and if he accepts that, rubbing with your hand.

Introducing the cat to the household

You have bonded with the cat, and it is time to introduce the cat to other people and to the rest of your household.

If family members haven't previously been involved, get them to sit in the room talking to the cat and also playing with him with string or wands. At first he will refuse to play with strange people, but sooner or later he will overcome his shyness.

If you have other cats, they will have figured out that something is going on. They will have smelled the new cat's scent. If your APA! foster cat is medically approved to integrate with other cats in your household, at first, introduce them to one another's scents by exchanging articles of bedding. Rub down the cats with one another's blankets to mix their scents. You need to fit a screen door or other screen barrier to the new cat's room – the cats can watch each other and the feral will learn from your pets' behavior.

Make a point of interacting with your pets in view of the new cat, especially picking them up (if they enjoy this), loving them, and putting them back down. Make sure the new cat sees how much your cats find this enjoyable (stick to interactions that your cats enjoy otherwise the new cat will learn to be fearful of interaction).

When the new cat is relaxed, you can leave his room open. Make sure to first cat-proof the rest of the house so the cat can't escape or get into problems. Because the cat may become overwhelmed at having access to the whole house at once, decide which rooms the cat can visit and which ones will be kept closed.

At first he will make forays out into the rest of the house to explore and find other hiding places. When he returns to his own room or settles into another 'safe place,' spend time with him – this reinforces the taming and socialization work.

If he hides around the house, always talk gently when you are near one of his hiding places. Don't force him out of these hiding places, though you can try luring him with food or toys. As he explores and learns more and more of the house, you can start to leave other rooms open.

Gradually move the cat's litter tray and food and water out of its original room to encourage the cat to spend time in the rest of the house. At first he may hide from you in the daytime, but the combination of night-time forays, moving food bowl, morning feeding, and continual reinforcement will eventually bring him out in the daytime.

Rehoming a tamed or rehabilitated shy/feral cat

Rehoming is a traumatic event for any cat but is doubly traumatic for a cat which has made the transition from distrustful wild creature to a tamed (though probably nervous) cat living a house.

If the cat is to be adopted out, the socialization must be repeated in the new home, beginning with confinement to a single room until the cat bonds with the new owners and moving on to exploring the house at night-time.

Although there may be setbacks, the process is usually quicker the second time around as the cat has already learned a lot about humans and living in a human environment. This time round, it is learning to apply this knowledge to new environment.

Socialized feral cats should be placed in a household where there is at least one fully socialized and cat-friendly domestic cat since he will learn a lot by observing his tame feline companions. The new owner must also be experienced with cats, especially with nervous cats, and willing to repeat and continue the work you have done.

Assess the cat's readiness and temperament carefully before he is adopted. The adopter should have spent plenty of time in your home getting to know the cat first since the cat must transfer his bond from you to the new owner. In fact, if the adopter can be involved in your taming process a good bond will build up right from the beginning.



Questions? Need help?

The APA! Cat Behavior team is here to help you. Email us at: cat-behavior-team@austinpetsalive.org

Need to reach the Cat Foster team? You can always reach them at: cat-foster-manager@austinpetsalive.org

Some information courtesy of the Stanford Cat Network, Cats Protection and Feline Advisory Bureau, and Best Friends Animal Society.