

Fostering a Frightened Cat



Thank you for fostering a timid kitty! This guide will give you all the tips and tricks you need to help the kitty gain more confidence and become ready for adoption.

Before bringing kitty home (creating a secure environment)

- Set kitty up for success by preparing a suitable environment. Set everything up (food/water bowls, litter tray, bedding, toys and a scratching post, each of these items should be against walls and as far from each other as possible) in a quiet room with a door (a baby gate is not suitable). Initially contain the cat to this single room until they are more comfortable. This could take days, weeks or longer. It is ideal to use a smaller room without a cupboard to hide in, or a human bed that kitty could hide under. We want to create a safe space for the cat to become familiar with; the smaller the space is to begin with, the fewer scary encounters the cat will have with the environment and the quicker they will settle in!
- It is important that kitty has a suitable place to hide. A cardboard box on it's side with a blanket at the bottom, an igloo pet bed or a cat carrier (that opens from the side) are suitable options. They should be positioned with the opening facing the door to the room so when the cat is hiding, they can still see you walking in (with delicious treats, more on this later). A cupboard is not an ideal hiding spot and there should not be a human bed in the room either (unless there's no space under it to hide). Kitty will eventually need to be placed in a carrier (eg. for vet visits) down the track so using it as the 'safe space' in the 'safe room' can be ideal.

Bringing kitty home

Ensure other animals (if any) are in another room so they don't 'greet' the new kitty at the door as this may scare kitty and set them back before even starting.

Bring the cat carrier into the designated room and close the door of the room. Place the carrier down at the wall on the opposite side of the room to the entry door (with the carrier opening facing the door to the room) and open it. Walk out the room. **DO NOT** try to pat the cat or pull him/her out of the carrier. This can be dangerous, you may get bitten or scratched and it will also set back the cats behaviour.

It can be normal for a timid kitty to stay in the carrier for many hours and to not eat or use the litter for the first day or two. Please speak to your Foster Mentor for advice if it has been more than 24 hours and the kitty hasn't eaten or used the litter tray.

*Give any behaviour medication as prescribed and **DO NOT STOP** without speaking to our vet clinic or Foster Care Officer. Contact our vet clinic at least 10 days before you will run out.*

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Can I force cuddle a scared kitten until the kitten is friendly?

Please **DO NOT** pick up a scared kitten and wrap him/her up in a towel and force pats whilst the kitten is hissing, growling and/or lunging. This is called 'flooding', which is where the kitten is being forced to endure excessive amounts of something that they are terrified of, and they are defenceless to do anything about. They go into a state of 'learned helplessness' which means they know they are unable to control or change the 'helpless' situation so they 'give up'. This is extremely stressful for kittens even though they may end up liking humans after. It's like being scared of snakes and being thrown into a deep pit full of them! At the start you'll be terrified but eventually you'll 'give up' and learn to endure them as there's no other option. Luckily, there's a much better way to help the kitten or cat become friendly 😊.

Rehabilitation training

Help the frightened cat learn that humans are not scary! First, we want to make the cat comfortable with you being in their 'safe room' then we'll teach the cat that pats are good. Ensure anyone who interacts with the cat follows these steps and not just 1 person. Wait a few days for the cat to settle in before starting training. When the cat is eating their food and toileting normally, follow the steps below to teach the cat that humans are amazing:

1. Enter the room quietly and speak softly as you enter (ideally saying a consistent phrase like 'hi kitty' to create predictability) to avoid startling the cat.
2. Place a high value treat (eg. a cat treat, wet cat food or cooked chicken with no bones, flavour or skin) near the cat and go to the other side of the room (as far from the cat/treat as you can). **DO NOT attempt to pat the cat.** If the cat eats the treat with you in the room then great! If the cat doesn't eat it after a while, leave the room and come back a few hours later. Over time, the cat will associate your presence with the appearance of tasty food!
3. Continue to repeat step 2 several times a day. When the cat is comfortable eating the treat within 10 seconds when you're in the back of the room, repeat step 2 but wait a little bit closer to the cat after giving the treat. Keep doing this and move closer until the cat is happily eating the treat from your hand or a spoon. It may take days and dozens of times at each distance from the cat, before progressing closer.
4. You can extend the time you are in the room and encourage the cat to explore in your presence by sitting quietly and reading/looking at your phone without inviting interaction from the cat. Sit away from the cat and read (out loud is ok). If the cat approaches or comes out of hiding to explore, avoid moving suddenly or reaching out to touch the cat. Gently roll a treat to the cat and resume your activity.

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As the cat begins to exhibit more positive body language signs (see table below) and can eat in your presence or even approach for food, you can begin to introduce touch as below:

1. Invite the cat to interact with you by calling its name and offering a treat (s/he may eat it from your hand or the floor, it doesn't matter).
2. Offer a very quick pat (eg. scratch gently under the chin or let the cat brush past your hand) then move your hand away and offer a treat a second later. Keep doing this until the cat is comfortable with this.
3. Then start to offer a slightly longer pats, wait a second then offer the treat. Keep doing this until the cat is comfortable with full body pats. This process may take days, weeks or longer and it's important not to progress to full body pats too quickly. If the cat displays any signs of stress or fear, stop and go back a step or two. Moving slowly and observing the cat's body language to understand what they are saying will help you to figure out what the cat is comfortable with and what frightens them. By reading the cats body language appropriately and progressing onto the next steps when the cat shows that they are ready, you can expect constant progress.

Signs of social body language	Signs of fearful/stressed body language
Eyes	
'Normal' pupils (not unusually dilated, some dilation due to low light is normal, of course)	Dilation of pupils (varies from slightly dilated/rounded to completely round with very little iris visible)
Soft blinking or eyes almost closed	Not blinking and/or staring
Good eye contact, but not staring	Avoiding eye contact
Face	
Relaxed/soft (the mouth is closed but not tight)	Tight brow, you may see wrinkles between the ears and eyes
Rubbing their chin/head on your hand	Tight closed mouth
Body	
Fur is smooth along body	Hair standing on end, sometimes called "hackles", along spine or shoulders
Stretching with bottom in the air	Avoiding contact or hiding
Approaching with back arched softly in a stretch	
Rubbing their body on your hands/legs	
Rolling over, eventually laying on side with head upside down (this is an invitation to be social, but <i>does not</i> invite pats on the belly!)	