



Willow 346505: What to Expect

Willow is a graduate of the Behavior Modification Program and needs a special home. Willow is a sensitive and playful boy who is ready to find his forever home. He easily becomes overwhelmed and stimulated with busy, chaotic environments, but once he feels safe, he loves being pet, eating yummy treats, soaking up sunshine sprawled out on his window perch, and playing with toys. Willow may never be a social butterfly with everyone he meets, but with patience and time to build trust, he will form a strong, loving bond with his person.

Willow was surrendered to OHS due to his previous owner being unable to provide care for him. When Willow arrived at OHS he displayed fearful, shy behavior that would present itself as hissing, swatting and attempting to bite if we got too close to him. While housed at the main shelter, Willow was experiencing significant fear, anxiety, and stress and because of the high stress he was experiencing, the decision was made to place him in our Behavior Modification Program. The environment in the BMOD program is better suited at helping cats feel comfortable in a shelter environment. With the larger kennel space, access to windows, increased enrichment, and dedicated one-on-one time with our team, we were able to help him decompress and learn more about his personality.

During his first few weeks in BMOD, Willow was extremely nervous and spent most of his time hiding on his cat tower, quietly observing his surroundings with wide, cautious eyes. When staff entered his kennel to provide care, he would remain frozen in his hiding spot. To help him feel more comfortable, staff spent time sitting calmly in his kennel, speaking softly and offering treats to create positive associations with people. Over the course of several weeks, Willow's body language gradually became more relaxed, and he began accepting treats while staff were present, showing increased confidence and trust with staff being in his presence.

As Willow became more familiar with the daily routine, he began exploring more of the space in his kennel, moving between perches to rest and watch the world outside the window. When staff entered to provide care, he would often greet them with gentle meows and relaxed body language. However, when kennel cleaning began, the increased movement and disruption to his environment caused his stress levels to rise. During these times, he would become overstimulated and respond by swatting at or lunging toward staff members' feet. We recognized that this behavior was Willow's way of communicating that he felt uncertain and uncomfortable with the activity taking place around him. In response, we adjusted our kennel-cleaning routine to better support him and reduce his stress. By making these changes and moving at a pace that helped him feel more secure, we were able to create a calmer experience for Willow during care and cleaning procedures.

As time went on, Willow became more confident and showed interest in coming out of his kennel to explore the larger area. He was introduced to several other cats and generally interacted appropriately with them. However, we observed that these introductions appeared to increase his overall stress and anxiety, and he began reverting to behaviors such as lunging at and swatting toward staff members' feet. To help him feel more comfortable and set him up for success, we adjusted his enrichment plan and allowed him to spend his out-of-kennel time exploring and playing independently. This approach helped reduce his stress and provided him with an environment where he could build confidence at his own pace.

Through ongoing observation, we were able to identify that unfamiliar or busy environments, as well as people moving quickly near him, were the primary triggers for Willow's swatting and lunging behaviors. With this understanding, we continued to focus on building his confidence through predictable routines, positive reinforcement, and regular one-on-one play sessions with staff. By rewarding calm, relaxed behaviors and providing him with opportunities to interact at his own pace, Willow became increasingly comfortable in his environment. Over time, these strategies significantly reduced the frequency and intensity of his swatting and lunging episodes.

Willow has formed strong bonds with several staff members during his time here, and through these relationships he has blossomed into a sweet, affectionate cat who truly enjoys human companionship. He now greets staff with cheerful meows and eagerly asks to come out of his kennel so he can be part of the activity around him. Once reserved and uncertain, Willow has grown into a confident and engaging companion who loves gentle cheek and chin scratches. He especially enjoys chasing wand toys with impressive leaps, racing through tunnels during playtime, and spending quiet moments birdwatching from his favorite perch.

Willow thrives in an environment with a predictable, consistent routine, and this structure has played an important role in helping him build confidence and feel secure. While his stress levels have decreased significantly during his time with us, he may still occasionally swat at feet when he is feeling overwhelmed or uncertain. Because of this, Willow would do best in a calm, quiet home with an adopter who is experienced in reading and responding to feline body language and who can recognize when he may need space or support.

Willow has shown that he prefers not to share his space with other cats and would be happiest as the only feline in the home. In return, he is ready to devote all of his affection and personality to his special person, becoming a loyal and loving companion for someone willing to appreciate him for the unique and wonderful cat he is.

His new family should expect that he will hide for a few weeks, possibly longer. You'll need to introduce him to new things slowly. Willow typically hides, hisses and swats when overwhelmed or scared. It's important to provide him with a small room with appropriate hiding spots for him to relax in, such as his own hidey bed. Hiding spots that are confined to a tight spot and out of reach from you will make it difficult to build a bond with him. The room you set him up in will be the catalyst for how quickly he acclimates. Start thinking now which room in your home would be best for Willow to settle into. If it's a bedroom, can he get under the bed or dresser making it difficult to spend time with him? If it's a laundry room or bathroom will the constant in and out of people and noises associated with these rooms be too much for him? By having a room without a lot of foot traffic and with appropriate hiding spots will allow you to work on building a relationship. While in his hiding spot, use calm voices and offer tasty treats to show you are not a threat. Place a small amount of wet food or a treat on a spoon and offer it to Willow while in his hidey spot. Over time, by continuing to do this, Willow will become more comfortable and recognize that yummy food = people, therefore creating a positive association between the two.

Here's how to help Willow during your first months together:

This step is crucial in helping Willow acclimate to his new home. Confine Willow to one cat-proof room in your house. Provide Willow with a litter box, food, water, and a bed. Ensure he cannot get to *inappropriate* hiding spots (under the bed, in a closet, on top of a cabinet, etc.). Provide him with a safe, comfortable hiding place instead like his cat carrier, a hidey-bed, or a large dog crate covered with a blanket.

Spend time with Willow in his room. Don't force him out of his hiding spot. Instead, encourage him to come out on his own using happy talk, offering a toy or treats. Once he is using the litter box, eating regularly, and coming out of hiding to interact with you, you can start introducing him to the rest of your home. Start by propping the door open and

allowing him to come out on his own. Don't force it! If you come across something that you can tell Willow is worried about, allow him to hang back or hide if he chooses to do so.

Continue to provide a safe space. Even when Willow has started exploring the rest of the house, give him a safe space that he can retreat to. When he is in his safe space, insist that guests leave him alone and try to ignore him yourself. That way, when he comes out, you can reward his bravery with your attention.

No visitors (at first). Allow Willow time to adjust to your house, routine, and lifestyle before introducing him to new people. When you have visitors over, give Willow the freedom to make the decision to interact (or not!). Ask new people to ignore him – or if Willow seems curious or interested, have the new person toss him treats or offer a favorite toy. We want exciting, good things to come from new people.

Practice crate training. Leave his carrier out all the time, so it's just a part of his normal environment. Add a bed and keep the door securely propped open so he can go in and out on his own, making sure the door won't swing shut and frighten him. You can also clicker train him to run into the carrier on cue. Helping Willow get comfortable with his carrier will make it easier when it's time to visit the vet.

Visiting the vet: Unless it's an emergency, give Willow time to bond to you before taking him to the vet. Vet visits will more than likely be scary, but if he already trusts you, your presence may help him feel more comfortable.

Patience will come in handy for you. Willow is a cat that needs an understanding owner who has the time and desire to allow him to adapt in his own time. He may never be a social butterfly, and that's okay! Getting to know him and watching him come out of his shell will be extremely rewarding. Celebrate those small victories.

We're here to help!

We want Willow to be successful in his new home. We're available to answer questions via phone and email. Call the Behavior Helpline at (503)416-2983 or email the BMOD cat trainers at bmodcat@oregonhumane.org to connect with the Feline Behavior Modification department.

Please keep in touch so we can continue to help you and Willow now and in the future. Please reach out if you have any questions or concerns – or just to give an update. We love to see photos and hear how our friends are doing!

Thank you for adopting from the Oregon Humane Society. Congratulations on your new cat!