

Adopting a Special Rescue Cat

Kittens who have not been appropriately socialized (meaning that they may not have been lovingly handled and petted, not picked up, not raised indoors, not given toys, etc.) usually grow up to be fearful and skittish of people and the sights and sounds of what we would consider normal home environments. They typically do best in calm, quiet homes so they can be allowed to slowly adjust at their own pace and begin their journey toward learning to trust. Some cats will remain fearful and skittish their whole lives, some may become affectionate towards familiar people, and others might become very friendly cats. Patience, realistic expectations and a good match in a home environment are the keys to success.

The following are a few considerations and challenges that unsocialized cats and their new families might face.

Children: Many unsocialized cats will not be able to cope in homes with children or visiting children. If they are around children, absolutely all interactions must be closely supervised by somebody who knows the [body language of cats](#). These cats could be forced to scratch and or bite as a response to being overwhelmed, especially if they feel cornered or are pushed beyond their comfort level. They are sensitive to loud noises and fast movements. They could also easily escape your home if doors are accidentally left open.

These cats may dart and hide: Remember that a special rescue cat is unlikely to have had prior experience with strangers, children, the sights and sounds of normal household activity, riding in an automobile, toys, or even petting. Expect them to be overwhelmed by everything they encounter. During the critical first weeks or months in a new home, their safety will depend on your good judgment and forethought, because **a frightened cat will dart when startled: out of a room, out the front door, or into a place where you cannot reach them.** We recommend that you keep these cats strictly indoors.

It will take time for these cats to feel safe and they will need to fully adjust to your home and family before being expected to deal with new people. Keeping low expectations and not rushing the process will help ensure success. Slow introductions and positive reinforcement will be the key.

Tips for Success:

Set your cat up in a small space at first: A bathroom or small spare room would be ideal but NOT the laundry room as the noise of the laundry may scare them. Remember to close the windows, many a scared cat has escaped through a screen when panicked! If you are setting your cat up in a bedroom, ensure the cat is unable to hide under the bed (you can use cardboard boxes securely pushed together to block off access). You can also consider using an acclimation crate. (See the handout [Your Fearful or Rescued Cat: Using an Acclimation Crate](#)).

Enrich their space: Along with food, water and a litter box, enrich their space with a cat bed (most cats prefer a 3" thick bed), a scratching post/cat tree, and toys for enrichment. Use a cardboard box, a hidey bed, or a crate/carrier for appropriate hiding places. An enriched indoor environment can help them come out of their shell.

Litter box training: Provide a large, open litter box and scoop the box twice a day in front of the cat; this can sometimes encourage the cat to use the box. The food and water dishes need to be placed as far away from the litter boxes as

possible. Make sure the cat is using the litter box consistently in the small room before allowing them limited access to other areas of your home, little by little.

Use treats and toys to build trust: Spend quiet time in your cat's room. Use a gentle voice and treats to help build a relationship with your new cat. Use toys that tap into their instincts, such as toy mice and things that flit around, such as a feather on a fishing pole.

Watch your cat's body language. If your cat is hiding in her hidey place, do not try to force her out. Bites and scratches happen when panicked cats are forced out of hiding. Instead, offer some wet food or treats and give your cat time and space to come out when ready. These cats may not have previously been petted, picked up, or handled. Initially, try using an extendable back scratcher or a soft toy as an extension of your hand to pet your cat.

Have patience! Even though you may want to let your new cat out of their "room" **please resist** until you see good litter box usage and more confident body language. Prior to letting them out, close all other doors to keep them out of as many places as you can where they may find an alternative toilet or hiding place. Supervise your cat when out of their room and place the cat back in their room when you are unable to supervise.

These cats will adjust best in a quiet, low traffic home. Once they know they are safe, you might discover a cat who learns to love being pet (albeit on their own terms), and enjoys playtime with their friends.

Additional Resources

Feliway: A pheromone, essential to ease the stress associated with change and we have found it may also help with litter box training if you spray it on their bed area to attract them to sleep on their bed instead of toileting on their bed. You can also spray Feliway on the back scratcher or toy that you're using to interact with your cat.

Rescue Remedy: a gentle flower essence to help reduce stress with just a few drops in the water dish twice daily.

Need help? Call our free pet behavior help line at (503) 416-2983.