



FACTSHEET

Shy cats

Unfortunately, not every cat or kitten has been well socialised when young. For this reason some kittens and cats may be shy. This does not mean they will never be friendly or loving, it just means they need a little extra love and support to help them adjust to their new life.

Many cats coming into Cat Protection's care have been stray or abandoned, with limited human contact. This means we might not be sure what their life was like before they came here. Having to find food and shelter in a harsh environment is hard enough, but some cats have also been victims of cruelty. When they come to our shelter they are bathed, worm & flea treated, vaccinated, microchipped, and desexed – in most cases, within a week. This can be overwhelming for many cats. It is also stressful for many cats to be housed in such close proximity to so many other cats. While we do our best to reassure the cats and provide TLC, a shelter environment is not the same as a loving and responsible home.

When adopting a shy or scared cat, there are a few things you can do to help make the transition less stressful.

- First, try to relax. If you are stressed or upset your cat will pick up on your emotional state and this can make them more scared
- When you get your new cat home, keep them in one room for 24-48 hours so they can adjust to being in a new environment. Remember, they have just had a car trip to add to their stress so will need time to calm down. It is advisable that you keep them in the carry basket for 30 minutes after arriving home just so they can settle a little bit
- Use a pheromone spray or diffuser. 'Feliway' is a product that imitates the pheromone cats give off when they rub their cheeks or flanks against things. This pheromone is a relaxing one that gives the cat a feeling of contentment. You can try placing the diffuser in the main room the cat will be and the spray on furniture, in other rooms and on your clothes (test on a small area of fabric first to make sure it doesn't stain). You can also look at using other calming interventions such as 'Zylkene' and calming treats to help your cat settle in
- Place the carry basket in the room the cat will be in for the next few days. It is advisable to place them in a laundry or bathroom in case any toileting mishaps occur
- Set up the room with a litter tray, warm bed, toys, water bowl, and food bowl. Place a small amount of food in the bowl to entice them out of the carry basket. If you have adopted just one cat, it's a good idea to place a stuffed toy in the bed so they have something to cuddle up with. If it's cold, place a hot water bottle under a blanket on the bed. An igloo type bed is often good for shy cats so they have a safe place to hide and feel secure. A cardboard box can also be a good idea as most cats feel safe hiding in a box
- Place a small radio in the room as well. Put it on softly so they get accustomed to different sounds. This will help them get used to you talking and entering the room. Try a classical music or jazz station as this helps calm them
- Open the carry basket door and let the cat come out on their own. Try not to force them to come out as this may scare them more

- If after 15 minutes the cat hasn't ventured out of the carry basket, try slowly moving a toy near the opening of the cage. Fishing pole toys are great for this. Slow, gentle movements with the toy may entice your cat to come and play. Try this for about 10 minutes. If they're still not moving, leave the room but leave the radio on. At this point don't get upset and think the cat dislikes you: try to imagine how scary this is for the cat and give them time. Check in on them every 30 minutes
- Some very shy kittens may take hours to get up the courage to leave the carry basket. If you look in the room and they are looking around, leave them for a little while to get used to the surroundings then go back in 30 minutes
- Once they are out, you can sit in the room with them and read to them or talk softly to them to reassure them all is OK
- Try giving them a pat. Be gentle. Don't be put off if they give a hiss, this is their way of letting you know they are upset or scared. Gently stroke their back or neck, if they like this try picking them up. When you pick them up, try to sit on the floor and pick them up from their level. Try to avoid standing up with them at this point as this may frighten them
- Sit with them on your lap and gently stroke them while talking in a soft, soothing voice. Some kittens will react well to this; others may squirm and try to get away. If your kitten tries to get away, without hurting them try to hold them for a couple of minutes longer, then let them go. You don't want to stress them more
- Now you can leave them overnight to look around the room and relax. Don't be surprised if they cry during the night – this is normal, as cats are usually awake when the sun starts coming up. Avoid the temptation to go to them during the night as this may reinforce the crying behaviour
- In the morning, carefully go into the room with some breakfast for your cat. Talk to your cat while opening the door so they aren't startled by you entering. Place the food in their bowl and sit in the room for a time, all the while softly speaking to your cat. If they run back into the carry basket don't worry, let them come back out on their own as before
- If the cat starts to eat while you are there this is great progress; try giving them a soft, gentle pat to reassure them
- As before, go in and out of the room regularly during the day if possible. Try to make a few of the visits for 30 minutes. During these visits, use the fishing pole toy again to try to interact with your cat; the movement encourages them to play
- Leave the radio on as much as possible and do everything you would normally do around the house. Noise is good as this will get the kitten accustomed to the normal goings-on in the house
- If you have older children let them visit the cat as well, as this will get the cat used to everyone who lives in the house. Younger children can visit with you for short visits. Never leave young children alone with your new cat, remember a cats first reaction to something they consider scary is to use teeth and claws
- The following day let the cat start investigating the house one room at a time, you don't want to overwhelm them. If possible close all doors to leading rooms and try getting them used to one room at a time. This will prevent them getting lost when hiding. Make sure all windows are closed – cats (even kittens) can move very quickly, and you don't want your cat to run away. Even if your windows have flyscreens, it's a good idea to close them as cats when frightened can easily tear through the mesh and escape

- Once your cat looks comfortable in one room you can introduce another room, until eventually they have free roam of the house. It's very important not to rush this process. Don't be worried if it takes some weeks for your cat to get used to your home and you
- Always make sure a litter tray is visible to your cat. This will reduce the risk of toilet mishaps. While your cat is unsure of the surroundings this may happen, so any time you notice a squatting stance, place the cat in the litter tray. If a mishap does occur, don't scold the cat as this will scare them more and your progress will be lost. Instead place them in the litter tray immediately (for more information refer to our factsheet on [Litter Training](#))
- Once your cat is venturing out into the house, make sure you have hiding spots they can retreat to when they feel overwhelmed. If you notice they are hiding, let them come out in their own time, never force them. Again, try the fishing pole toy to entice them out. Make sure any dangerous hiding spots are blocked off, like under the stove or washing machine, to prevent any harm coming to your cat
- It is very important throughout this whole process, to let your cat guide you. Learn to read their body language to avoid either of you becoming more stressed.

Finally, don't hesitate to call Cat Protection if you are worried about your new family member. We are here to help both you and your new cat.

Most importantly, remember PATIENCE and PERSEVERENCE will help you build a loving and trusting relationship with your cat. Don't take it personally if the process takes some time. Your cat needs to learn to trust you and accept you as their family too.

While all care has been taken in preparing this document, it is intended to provide general information only and should not be taken as constituting professional advice. Mention of a product or business does not mean endorsement by Cat Protection.