



Do you have a fearful cat? Here are some tips for socializing your cat or kitten using low-stress methods!

Sensitive Period

Kittens undergo a sensitive or developmental period between 2-7 weeks of age. During this time, they learn about their environment and develop important memories. Research has shown that kittens who are handled positively by at least 4-5 different people during this time are likely to be more sociable as adults, versus being handled by just one person.

Kittens who are not adequately socialized during this period can become fearful of people, avoiding contact and displaying defensive aggression when approached or touched. This makes it more difficult to provide for their essential needs, such as when they need to be groomed, transported, or handled for a veterinary exam.

Cats can also become fearful of people or certain objects if they have a negative experience. For example, if you groomed your cat and they experienced some pain or discomfort (e.g. having matts untangled from their fur) they may hide or retreat next time you bring out the grooming brush. The sight of the grooming brush may trigger anxiety and stress, as they associate the brush with pain they previously experienced while being groomed. Therefore, it's important that cats have positive experiences with various types of tools or objects they encounter during routine care or husbandry procedures.

Identifying Fear

Some common signs of fear in cats and kittens include:

- Running away
- Avoidance, turning the body away
- Hiding
- Shaking
- Flattened or rotated ears
- Small, crouched body position
- Freezing or a stiff posture
- Releasing anal glands
- Pupil dilation

If a cat feels significantly threatened in a specific situation, fear can also escalate to defensive aggression. This is a natural behaviour that is evolutionarily adaptive for survival purposes – it is not your cat simply being “bad” or “naughty” on purpose.



Some common signs of defensive aggression in cats include:

- Vocalizations (hissing, growling, spitting)
- Swatting
- Biting
- Scratching
- Puffing fur and tail (piloerection)
- Arched back
- Swishing tail

Recognizing the subtle signs of fear in cats will help you identify when to stop or lessen the intensity of the interaction. This helps prevent a bite or a scratch and also prevents your cat from developing behavioural issues, which can be difficult to resolve in the future.

Environment and Enrichment

It is important for our cat to feel safe in their environment. When they feel comfortable, they are more likely to explore, play, sleep or rest, and interact with people. There are several ways you can help your cat relax and promote positive behaviours. Some things to consider are:

- Cats have an excellent sense of smell and a vomeronasal organ which allows them to detect chemical signals called pheromones. Try using a calming pheromone diffuser product called Feliway® can help reduce stress in cats.
 - If you have multiple cats in your household, you can also try the Feliway Friends® product, which uses natural appeasing messages to potentially help reduce conflict between cats.
- Cats like to feel safe. When they feel stressed, their natural response is to retreat or hide. Therefore, it's important we provide our cat with a "safe" space, such as a hiding box, elevated perch, feline fort, cat tunnel, or cat carrier. They should be able to easily enter and exit their hiding place, without being disturbed.
- Cats like to explore and rest on elevated places. This allows them to monitor their environment, which is a great form of enrichment. Consider building perches for your cat, or have a scratching post with multiple levels.
- Ensure your cat has access to a scratching post. Scratching is an essential behaviour for cats, so they need a suitable surface to perform this behaviour. Most cats prefer a vertical scratching post (at least 3 ft in height) made with rope (sisal) and has two or more levels with a base width between 1-3 ft. However, each cat has individual preferences, so you may need to experiment with scratching posts made of different materials (e.g. carpet, cardboard).
- Provide your cat with suitable enrichment, such as toys (e.g. catnip toys, balls with bells, boxes, wand toys) and food puzzles. Consider rotating toys, offering new toys or items, and engaging your cat in appropriate play or training sessions.
 - Food puzzles or hiding food around the house is a great way to stimulate your cat's natural predatory behaviour.



- Make sure your cat has easy access to their food, water, hiding place, scratching post, and litter box. Fearful cats will be deterred to use these essential items if there is too much activity in the household, or if they are encountering conflicts with other cats. If you have multiple cats in your household, offer multiple access points to these resources to avoid inter-cat conflicts.

Reward-Based Training

Using reward-based training is a great way to help socialize fearful cats! Over time, the consistent use of positive reinforcement can help change a cat's perception of people – from fearful to positive. This process is known as counter-conditioning.

Read and download the [Reward-Based Training for Cats](#) resource from our website.

What to AVOID

In summary, here are some things to avoid when addressing fear in cats:

- Punishing fearful behaviour. This can cause fear to escalate to aggression, and can lessen your cat's willingness to interact with you in future.
- Going too fast. Go at your cat's pace. If they show any signs of fear, end the interaction and try again later. Do not force them to be held or handled. Always reward desired behaviour with treats and verbal praise.
- Having a lot of activity in your household. Fearful cats will be more willing to explore an environment that is quiet and has easily accessible hiding spaces.

If your cat is having fear-related issues that you can't resolve, it is recommended that you consult with your veterinarian to ensure there are no underlying medical issues. Cats may hide or avoid contact when they are experiencing pain. If a medical condition is ruled out, your veterinarian can help determine some appropriate steps to help address your cat's anxiety, such as an anti-anxiety medication.

Did You Know?

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