

Socializing shy/fearful/undersocialized cats and kittens



The first priority with these cats and kittens is to make them feel safe. Once they are more comfortable, it is important to work on trust and showing them humans are the source of good things.

All kittens and cats will progress at different rates. These are just guidelines. If your kittens are running to the front of the kennel to greet you after a day, you can progress much more quickly than kittens that freeze or hide when you enter the room. Some adults recover from trauma more quickly than others. Strays that were once loved pets may quickly recover once they feel they are safe. A grieving cat may need you to be more assertive with attention. Ask us if you aren't sure or need more guidance.

Steps:

1. Initial set-up
 - Always start kittens in a small area, preferably a large kennel. You want to be able to work with them without having to chase and scare them. Remember cats are both predator and prey. You want to be on their level initially not towering over them. Feral kittens are in prey mode and view you as a predator. The kennel should have a carrier or something they can feel safe in.
 - Start adult cats in a room (unless they are semi-feral). Preferably without a bed where it is difficult to work with them. Make sure there are hiding places but ones that you can reach them if you need to. A semi-feral or very under socialized cat should also be started in a large kennel.
 - Have a radio in the room or cat tunes on.
2. Let them decompress. The time you give them depends on how scared they are and their progress. For the first 24 to 48 hours at least, just let them acclimate to their surroundings. Give them food and water and talk softly to them while you are in the room. Move slowly while cleaning their kennel or room. Don't try to touch them.
3. Once they will look at you and are not panicking when you are in the room and you are sure they are eating well, it's time to start working with them. For adults, as long as they are eating and coming out to use their litter box, you can start progressing even if they are still avoiding eye contact.
 - a. Wet food only when you are in the room. Start by simply giving it to them and then moving back but staying in the room while they eat. You can leave dry food out especially for kittens so they always have food.
 - b. Start staying in the room and reading out loud. No pressure on them to do anything. Just get them more comfortable with you being near and your voice.
 - c. Slowly start staying closer while they eat. Once they will eat with you right next to them, start hand feeding them. I typically put food on a spoon first to see how they remove it. If they bite the spoon, you may want to only feed it on a spoon. Otherwise try holding your hand open with it on your finger tips. For adults, you may need to use something higher value like a churu or small amounts of tuna for this step.
 - d. You can also consider moving the kennel to a different area in the house where there is more activity at this stage. We still recommend a small room though for when they are able to start exploring. Kennels are great as you can easily move them to different locations depending on what you are working on.
4. Once kittens are eating next to you or out of your hand, start placing your hand in the kennel and see if they will approach your hand or rub it. For adults, just place your hand near them and see if they will rub it. If they are not showing fear, try gentle slow pets. Do not approach from directly overhead or in front. Start from the side. Slowly progress with petting based on their reaction. If this is a semi-feral cat, you can start with a touch stick.

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This is a dowel with a soft end you can make with gauze, coban wrap, a wash cloth etc. Once they are rubbing on the touch stick and appreciating pets, you can slowly start using your hand.

5. Once they are enjoying pets, start working on picking them up and holding them. For kittens, just go with their comfort level. For an adult, start by gently applying pressure to their belly but not actually picking them up and then rewarding with a treat or play or pet (whatever they like). Next try lifting just an inch and putting them right back down and then reward. Gradually increase how far you lift until you are holding them.
6. The next step when the kittens are not showing fear from their kennel is to let them have time out of the kennel in an enclosed room. Leave the door open and let them come out on their own. Once they are exploring, work with the wet food and treats to get them to come to you and let you pick them up. Initially they should only be out for an hour or two. Work up to all day and kennel at night and finally to out all the time with the kennel door open.
7. Initially stay low at their level. Remember they see you as a predator and towering over them is still going to be frightening. Once they approach you when you are on the ground and are comfortable, gradually start standing in with them. Play can make them more comfortable. Work on being able to approach them. Taking it slow is the key. You want to be able to reach down and pick up a kitten without it running in terror.
8. Introduce play. Once the kittens or cat are eating treats and enjoying pets, start introducing play. Kittens typically respond quickly to a feather toy. Adults that have never had someone play with them need a slow approach as at first it is scary and seems like it is trying to attack them. Start with the feather away from them and let them approach.
9. Another thing to start working on is getting in the carrier. For both kittens and adults, try putting a high value treat like a tiny bit of tuna just inside the door. Slowly over time, put it in farther until they are fully entering the carrier. Once they will go in without hesitation, close the door for a second and open. Slowly increase the time it is shut to 30 seconds or so. They will realize that while the door closes, it will open. Stop if they are panicking. Next, shut the door and take them around the house, back to their room and let them out. Lots of treats or play.
10. Next for kittens, take them on field trips in the rest of your house one at a time. Hold them securely. If they are squirmy, wrap in a towel. You don't want them to jump down and get scared. Take them out for short times and bring back to the room when they show fear. Gradually increase their field trips. Once they are comfortable you can hold them while you watch a tv show or movie or look out a window. Typically we do not do this for adults. They will be able to explore in their home once adopted.

Congratulations! Thanks to your hard work, if the kitten or cat is enjoying pets, will let you pick them up, and will come to you, they are ready to be adopted. While they most likely will initially be scared in their new home, you've given them a strong foundation and they will soon become comfortable with their adoptive home.