Cat Behavior

Tips to rehab and socialize feral or frightened cats and kittens

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13 Comments

"Alana, I volunteer for a trap neuter release org outside of Philadelphia, so I spend a lot of time around feral cats. If you are able to provide tips/info to the readers here about taking in/ "rehabbing" ferals, it would be appreciated. I know many people try to open their hearts to all kinds of cats, and it would be great to have guidance that would help them develop a successful relationship with their new pets. Thanks." – Lisa

A cat who is frightened may behave the same way initially as a cat who is feral. Please read the difference between feral and stray. Some individuals prefer terms such as 'free-roaming' when labeling cats. Language is important, and I do believe it is damaging to cats when we instantly label them as feral because they are found outdoors, look uncared for, or are fearful.

If you do have a feral or frightened cat or kitten you are caring for or have taken in, these tips can help.

- Designate an area or room in your house that is quiet, clean and safe. Too much noise or commotion can be startling for cats.
- Make this room kitty-friendly by adding vertical territory (cat furniture and platforms that encourage cats to be higher up and off the floor) and by positioning cat bowls, litter pans, platforms and furniture in desirable locations.
- Give it time. Have patience. When an animal is fearful, s/he needs time to calm down, de-stress, and trust you. Trust is built, and for fearful, traumatized, or feral cats, it takes time.
- Position all food, water bowls, litter pans, cat beds and platforms in locations that have nice peripheral or landscape views of an area.
- Move quietly. Sporadic, sudden, or loud movements — such as heavy walking or quick movements — can be frightening (Think of a spider suddenly jumping, landing next to you, or scurrying across a carpet). Be soothing with your voice and walk gently. Move slowly, yet stay relaxed. Cats dislike loud sudden noises and sporadic movements, especially if they are wary or uncertain, or unfamiliar with their surroundings.
- Desensitize (which means gradually introduce) feral kitties to your presence. Enter the room or an area the kitty is in and sit down. Read a book, work on your laptop, drink some tea or coffee, write, or mediate. Do not fixate on the cat or try to coax the cat to approach you or interact with you. By being present but not approaching or engaging the cat, the cat will feel more comfortable with you and safer.
- Acclimate the cats to your voice. Talk to the cats soothingly and/or softly baby-talk to them. For animals, higher sounds (with the exception of distress noises) are associated with nurturing young and courtship within a species. This is why we naturally baby-talk or talk softly to newborns. Lower sounds are associated with aggression or territoriality. This is true throughout the animal kingdom — yes, even for animals who make sounds above and

below our hearing range. (It is also a reason why many animals can be initially more fearful of men than women.)

- Show friendly, gentle, and trusting body-language. Try not to sit or stand so that you face the cat directly or stare at him/her. Being stared at is unnerving for cats. Always look at the kitty, make eye-contact, acknowledge him or her verbally, and then glance away again.

- Give 'blinkies.' Blink intentionally when you look at your kitty. Cats will softly blink at another individual to show gentle motives and friendly intention. Cats do not rapidly blink their eyes the way we do. When your cat looks at you, blink slowly. Close your eyes for one full second, then look at your kitty. Glance away from your cat, blink again, then look back at your cat. Blink again slowly, repeating 2 or 3 times. Look away again. By blinking softly when your cat looks at you, you will convey that you are friendly and non-threatening.

- Pair your presence and all exits and entries with food. Even if your cat hides or remains at a distance, leave food and/or treats for your cat every time you enter the room or area. Also put down food and treats before you leave. Wet food, tuna juice, meat baby food, bonito flakes, feline greenies (ocean fish flavor), freeze-dried chicken treats (avoid treats made in China) are examples of foods and treats to try.

- Restrict access to hiding areas. A feral or shy cat will never acclimate to your presence if s/he is always hiding and out of sight. Block access to hiding spots such as inside the box spring mattress, under the bed amongst boxes and trinkets, or in the back of the closet behind the laundry. In order for cats to be desensitized to your presence, they have to be exposed to you – albeit safely and at a level they are comfortable with. If they are always hiding under the bed or behind a dresser, they will never learn that you are safe or associate you with good things. Cats may absolutely like to hide and borrow under something, but make sure these locations can provide a visible view of you and are easily accessible. Cat domes (enclosed cat beds with an entry) or hideaways on cat trees and cat condos are good choices for providing your cats security and privacy while still allowing them to see you if they choose to.

- Provide warmth. Cats love soft, warm things to lay down on. Sunny window perches and heated cat beds will provide comfort to make your kitty more relaxed. A cat who is more relaxed is less fearful.

For kittens and young cats

If you are rescuing or housing feral kittens, please keep kittens together and with their mother for as long as possible. Kittens need the social company of other kittens. Mothers of feral kittens are often kittens themselves. Kittens who are weaned too early or separated from their mother or other kittens can show a tendency for play aggression, dislike of handling, and biting. Six and seven weeks is too young for a cat to be taken away from his or her mother or separated from other kittens. Even eight weeks is too young developmentally for a kitten to be separated from other cats and kittens.

When fostering or rehabbing feral or frightened young cats and kittens, encourage them to play.

- Make sure to play appropriately and in a way that is not intimidating or scary to fearful or frightened cats. When playing with a feral cat, move an enticing toy or string *away* from the cat. Do not look at the kitten, lean towards him/her or toss or swing the toy towards the kitten. This will only make a fearful kitten more fearful. Instead, read How to Play with a Cat and make a toy move like prey.

- If your kitten or cat loves play, always associate play with your presence.
- Always end play sessions with food or treats.
- Leave small cat toys out, such as toy mice and crinkle balls, for the kittens to play with when you are not in the room. Rotate toys every day or two to make them interesting.
- Leave dry food out at all times for kittens and cats to nibble at will.

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About Author

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Alana Stevenson can be contacted through her website www.AlanaStevenson.com. She has been professionally resolving feline behavioral problems for over ten years.