Socialization Manual for Kittens and Cats
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Welcome and Thank You!
Thank you for helping us socialize these scared felines! Whether you are fostering some hissy kittens, or just trying to make a scared adult cat feel more comfortable, your hard work, patience, and dedication will help your foster feline shine, and become the best they can be as they prepare for adoption!

While we do provide stages with age estimates for kittens, it is important to note that these are general guidelines, not permanent rules. Just as we have adult cats at different stages of comfort with humans despite being previously socialized, there will also be kittens of all ages who are in all stages; this guide is most effectively used as a progression based on wherever your socialization feline is starting, regardless of age.

As always, if you have any questions along the way, please email foster@phillypaws.org or check out our foster resource page: https://www.phillypaws.org/foster-resources

Socialization Toolbox
Their living space should be set up so the foster cat or kitten can succeed at their specific socialization level. You will also need a few things in your toolbox.

Living space:

- Controlled hiding spaces
- Litter box (at least one)
  - Ideally, there should be one litter box per cat plus one in your home
  - This is not always possible but to avoid accidents, multiple cats = multiple litter boxes
- A place for the kitten to sit up high and watch the day’s activities (and you)
- Cardboard boxes
- Scratching post, cardboard scratcher, or something similar

“Toolbox”

- Crinkle balls
- Rattle mouse toys
- Fishing pole toys with feathers on the end
- Cozy or fluffy blankets
  - Microfleece and sherpa style blankets are winners
  - They’ll make biscuits on the blankets, but try to gently discourage nursing/sucking on the blanket since not all adopters like that
- A brush, ideally one that mimics a cat’s tongue
  - Grooming is a social behavior that only happens when they feel safe
  - These brushes help create positive associations
Socializing 101

What is “Kitten Season”?

Female cats are seasonally polyestrous; this means that when the conditions are right, a female cat will go into heat, get pregnant, and have her litter. Once they are weaned and can survive on their own, she will return to a state of heat until the seasonal conditions change.

These conditions are based on temperature and daylight. Warmer temperatures combined with longer days will send intact females into heat. If there are enough warm days in the first part of the year, they could go into heat as early as February and as young as four months old! A stretch of warm to hot days later in the year means a female cat could go back into heat as late as October/November. She can have as many as three litters a year and upwards of 50 to 150 kittens over a period of ten years.

When municipal shelters are overwhelmed with kittens and rescues like PAWS do not have enough available foster homes, those shelters are left with no choice but to start euthanizing. This is why trap-neuter-release of all ferals, including the friendly ones, is critical work to reducing Philadelphia’s euthanasia rate. Your foster home is life-saving, to both the new kittens and the adoptable adult cats that have lost their families or have been abandoned. So again, thank you for fostering!

Can True Ferals be Socialized?

During kitten season, feral cats and friendly feral cats are best served by TNR programs. TNR is short for “Trap Neuter Release.” This is where a rescue group traps ferals and brings them to the shelter. From there the cats are vetted, spayed or neutered, and released back into their territory if deemed safe. If there is a maintained colony near by, they may be released there.

On the surface, it does not appear to make sense to return ferals who are friendly. If a cat is friendly, even if feral, they could become a house pet - in theory. You may have heard stories about the older, friendly feral that turned into a house pet; these are likely cats that were handled when they were younger, but were never fully socialized. Socializing a friendly feral, while possible, requires a great deal of time, patience, and effort. These miracle cats are also rare because friendly ferals are often friendly outside, but once they are brought inside, they become stressed, unhappy, and do not want to be around other cats or dogs.

TNR prevents more ferals and unwanted kittens from being born, preventing overpopulation, prey species destruction, and the perpetuation of feral cat viruses. In combination with socialization, the TNR of friendly ferals, especially during kitten season, saves lives.
What is “The Window”?  

There is a short period of time, roughly 16 to 24 weeks old, in which a cat can be socialized to humans before they become feral. After 24 weeks, their socialization window can permanently close. While some ferals can be handled, they usually do not want to be house pets, and thus unadoptable through agencies like PAWS who specialize in domesticated house cats.

Kittens younger than 16 weeks are easily socialized to home-life if they have positive human interactions during this age and as they grow. Kittens that are 16 to 24 weeks old are a little trickier, and require extra diligence and patience to socialize, often with food or a friendly adult cat as incentives to socialize with humans.

All adult cats at PAWS will be previously socialized cats that backslid and developed fearful behaviors due to the stress of losing their previous home and entering the shelter environment; they often follow the same socialization pattern as 16 to 24 week old semi-feral kittens, but often warm up faster over time.

Positive Associations

Socializing felines of all ages is all about creating positive associations with the presence of humans.

It starts with slow blinks. Unlike humans, cats do not have a physiological need to blink. Eyes closed in the wild means they are vulnerable to other predators. If you slow blink at a cat, you are telling them, “I trust you.” When they slow blink back or close their eyes in your presence, they are telling you they trust you back!

Your other primary tools are food and play. Feeding them, petting them as they eat, and playing with them all create positive associations in their minds with humans and our hands.

Gauging Progress

A scared and unsocial kitty will not allow themselves to be vulnerable around you. A cat who is well on the way to being a social kitty will do one and gradually all of the following in your presence:

- Blink at you
- Eat
- Play
- Groom themselves
- Use the litter box
- Sleep

All of these activities require the cat to feel safe enough to do activities that would leave them vulnerable in the wild. Even if they still run away from you, if they are doing these things they’re socialized and now just need to increase their confidence! (More on that later!)
The Stages of Socialization

Socialization Stage One: 2 to 6 weeks old

This age is when the kitten is most receptive to being around humans and being handled. The below list works for nursing and weaned kittens:

- Slow blink at them
- Pet them
- Hold them
- Cuddle them
- Gently massaging all of their paws
- Love them

At about 5 to 6 weeks old, they can start to get a bit hissy if they have not been around people. If you feed them and pet them, they will be eating out of your hand (literally) within a day or two. They may also spit or swat, but you should try not to jump or get scared of them. These are reflexive, “I don’t know you, why are you so big,” defensive moves. Jumping back tells them spitting and swatting will scare you away. Let them see you put wet food into their bowl, and they should warm up quickly.

A quick note on the little ones: Kittens at this age are babies who do not fully understand how cat litter works. They know they are supposed to use it when they have to go to the bathroom, but it takes some practice. Expect poopy feet and butts, and try to keep them as clean as you can! PLEASE NOTE: Liquid poop is not normal, and could be an indicator of illness in cats and dogs of all ages. Contact your foster coordinator right away if your foster animal has liquid poop.

Socialization Stage Two: 7 to 12 weeks old

The kitten’s sense of independence and personality have started developing. When you first approach your foster kitten, keep in mind that they may have recently been taken from everything that was familiar. Since then, they have been handled by big scary creatures (humans), stuck in a cage, and put through the initial vetting process, which includes being poked with needles. Human beings are not high on the list of things kittens and young cats trust.

Normal behavior at this age:

- They are going to be more hissy, and they may be closer semi-feral if they are approaching 13 weeks.
- They are more likely to hunker down in the litter box or hide.
  - Litter is where they go to the bathroom; this means litter is a safe space to a scared kitten or cat
- They will run from you.
- They will not eat around you.
- They will not play around you.
- They watch you, but they will not approach.
Just like with the 5 to 6 week olds, if they hiss or swat at you, don’t jump and don’t get scared. That will tell them their hissy behavior is working, and it will reinforce that response around other people.

**Things to be aware of:**

Humans are big. Kittens are tiny and fragile. They are, in essence, prey, and they know it. We do not look like cats, we do not move like cats, or respond to stimuli like cats. They don’t understand us. All they know is that we are big and scary. The ideal fear response is that they run away and hide. The other possible response involves teeth, claws, and no one likes that one, not even them. Never corner your foster kitten if you can avoid it. Always leave your scared foster cat a way to run away.

- Block off any possible hiding spots that allow them hide out of reach
- Provide them with hiding spots that allow them to see you and you to reach them
- Don’t stand over your foster; this is intimidating and predator behavior in the wild
- Approach them from the side or from a lower position

Remember, when they first come to your home, they probably will want nothing to do with you. They’ll hiss, they’ll run, they’ll hide. All totally normal behavior, and to be expected.

**Mealtime is a great time to socialize at this stage:**

- This works best with wet food
- Open the can in front of them
- Put the food in the bowl
- Slowly back away and blink
- Just sit there
- The next feeding, move closer until they stop eating and run away
- Move backwards to the position where they would eat.
- Wait for them to return and eat.
- Continue to push and reset their boundary with each meal time.

Starting with when you open the can of wet food, and especially as you sit there with them, try talking to them quietly. If they respond negatively while they are eating, stop talking, and try again at the next mealtime.

**Once you can sit next to them while they eat:**

- Let your fingers rest near the bowl
  - If they stop eating, pull back
- Repeat until they eat with your fingers resting on the bowl
- Start gentle, single finger pets
  - Back of the neck or around the ears
  - If they stop, you stop
  - Try again once they’re inhaling the food
- Once they start purring, you’re there
  - Even if they run away after
When you aren’t actively working with them, be present in their space whenever you can. Slow blink, talk to them, read a book, watch tv, sit on the floor, etc. The goal is to get them used to your presence as normal everyday thing.

After two or three days of this, bring a feathered toy on a pole, a flying or fishing pole toy with you. Get their attention and see if you can draw them out. They may not respond positively right away and that’s okay. If they seem ‘stuck’ and you have a friendly cat, try playing with the friendly cat where they can watch.

If they continue to seem scared or unsure and are just watching you from a safe spot, lay down on your back where they can see you. Don’t rest your hands or anything on your stomach. The exposed belly is universal the animal kingdom: the ultimate sign of trust and vulnerability.

**Socialization Stage Three: 13 to 24 weeks old**

They’re coming up to the end of their window. If you have been given one of these kittens, you likely have a friendly socializing cat at home or experience socializing Stage Two felines. **PLEASE NOTE:** Because of the potential to spread illness, we recommend your resident felines are vaccinated, healthy, and do not share litter boxes with foster felines.

You can approach this stage the same way you would younger kittens. Once they have slow-blinked back at you, allowed you to sit relatively near them while eating, and positively met your friendly resident cat (or foster), you need to move into building their confidence. They may not be as successful when confined to a single room at this age. **Cats are profoundly territorial and social animals.** Their entire emotional world is dependent on feeling a sense of ownership over territory.

For this to work, you should have a litter box in your main living space or an area frequented by people, like a bathroom. There are igloo and top entry style litter boxes that work for this. This will give them a sense of ownership in the space where everyone lives.

Close off doors to the other rooms and block the other hiding spaces. Take the kitty training wheels off. Their ‘home base’ is going to become your living room, not the isolation room. Make sure any hiding spot is one that allows you to get to them easily and allows them to see you.

They will hide. They will run away from you. This is all normal. They’re still learning human body language. Remember, for all they know we are a large predator and we are going to catch them and eat them.

You live your life with your friendly cat as normal, which includes playing with them where your foster can watch. If they start to come out of their hiding space, “ignore” them, and stay focused on your friendly cat. If you look at the foster directly, they may sense the “predator”, and go back to their hiding place.

Repeat at least twice a day. **Play is critical to socializing the kittens up against the close of the window.** It builds confidence, positive associations, and burns off energy that might otherwise go towards being scared of you.
Nervous Non-Feral Adult Cats
With nervous adult cats, you will want to start at Stage Two, and try to progress all the way to the end through Stage Three. If you get stuck and reach a socialization plateau, clicker training is a great way to get back on track or even expedite getting an adult cat comfortable with you, or new people in general. It also gives them an arsenal of confidence-building processes that can be easily taught to new adopters to lessen the negative impact changing environments can have on shy cats.

Clicker Training for Confidence Building
Clicker training for cats involves similar concepts to clicker training for dogs. If you do not have clicker on hand, you can pick one up from any PAWS location or just make a click sound with your tongue; as long as you are consistently using the same sound each time, it will work. Also, use portions of the feline’s regular meals as opposed to treats, so they do not become overweight and are more eager to train because they are hungry for their regularly scheduled mealtime. The examples below use a full meal of dry kibbles as individual rewards.

Charging the Clicker
Click, and then immediately give them a kibble. Wait until they are done eating it, and when they begin to look around for more, click and give the another kibble. Repeat charging the clicker until they begin to look at you and wait for another kibble. This should be done at the beginning of every “session” to remind the cat the connection between the sound and the reward.

Asking for Actions
Once the link between the sound and the reward are established, you can start to ask for specific behaviors, or “tricks”. One very successful behavior for scared adult cats to start with is asking for a “slow blink”. This allows your foster animal to interact with you from a distance and possibly from within a hiding spot. Slowly blink your eyes; if the cat blinks back (a slight eye twitch or single-eye blink totally counts!), make the click sound, and gently toss them a kibble. Repeat until they are consistently responding to your requests for slow blinks.

Minimizing Wrong Answers
Never get angry with a scared cat who does not engage in the action you are requesting; it does not boost their confidence to get something wrong. In that sense, set them up for success by offering lots of baby steps, ample reward kibbles, and an extra dose of loving patience.

Asking for Too Many
In our eagerness to help, it can sometimes be easy to ‘ask for too many’ before getting the right answer; an example of this commonly seen in dog training is to ask a dog to ask them to “sit...sit....sit....” before they actually do the action of sitting the first time; give your foster feline time to digest what you are asking and allow them to respond on their own time, which can take a while. Again, lots of patience :)

Rewarding Success
Often a succession of small steps are needed to get to a “trick” like “high-five” or “jumping through a hoop”. A cat does not go from hiding under a dresser to high-five expert in a week. For example, once your foster cat is confident slow blinking back to you with a clicker-reward following, start another baby step, such as “low-five with a stick”, where the stick can be a popsicle stick, the end of a wand toy, etc. Offer the stick to the cat, trying to stay as far away with the rest of your body as possible (to minimize any possible feelings of being trapped).
Some cats will sniff the stick pretty readily, while other cats will just look at it and will not approach. For the cat who only looks at the stick, that is a success for where they are in their socialization journey; click, and give them a kibble. Once they are more confident to sniff the stick, click-reward. Then maybe you lightly touch the stick to their paw; click-reward. You can make up as many baby steps as you like to help your foster cat gain trust in you and confidence in themselves!

**Try This!**
Try this progression over a few weeks; try to make sure they are comfortable with a step before moving to the next one: “slow blink” → “low-five with a stick” → “low-five with a finger/hand” → “high-five with a stick” → “high-five with a hand”

**More Resources, Including Hands-On Training!**
There are several really great clicker training resources out there on websites like YouTube, and PAWS also offers foster-parent specific workshops and resources, including example videos and in-person trainings with PAWS Staff and PAWS Cat Socialization Volunteers; email Meredyth@phillypaws.org for more information!

**Administering Medication:**
This is where it can get tricky: A scared cat who needs medication. Cats do not like having drops put in their eyes or syringes shoved in their mouth. Every time you medicate them, it can feel like your positive associations and socialization progress get set back; this is normal, and okay!

The first thing to try is to ask about finding a way to give them their medication through food; ask your foster coordinator to get in touch with a vet to confirm how their specific medication can be administered through food. This frees up your hands to remain positive and not terrifying. Tuna fish juice from the can drizzled over their food may help with this. **PLEASE NOTE:** Many medications involve scruffing a cat; if you do not know how to safely scruff a cat or kitten, please ask PAWS staff to avoid accidentally hurting your foster feline!

**If the medication cannot be given in their food:**
- Do not under leave them any hiding spots that require you to grasp and fight them to pull them out
- Try to get them to play, and medicate them when they are tired
- Have tasty cat treats ready as a follow-up
- Talk to them softly
- Scruff them the way momma cat would
  - You should be holding them from behind, one hand with the scruff (pulling up the skin on the back of their neck), and the other hand with the medication

Once in a scruff, the kitten should instinctively go limp. If you are holding them from behind, once you get the syringe in their mouth, you can give them their meds and release them. Follow up with food and treats at all times. Positive associations!

**Last ditch effort:** Ambush them when they are sleeping. Get in, get out, and leave a treat as you go.

*Thank you for joining PAWS in saving lives!*
*As a foster care provider, you are giving an animal not just care and love, but another very special gift: a second chance at a full and wonderful life.*