

# Adopting a Fearful Kitten

---

## What Does “Fearful” Mean?

A fearful kitten is generally one that has not had full socialization. If a kitten does not have much contact with people when it is between the ages of 3 weeks and 7 weeks, it is likely to be scared of strangers it meets. Depending on the individual temperament of the kitten, what it has observed from its mother, and how old it is, it may hiss, spit or strike out - or may simply attempt to run away. Some under socialized kittens learn to trust people quickly, others can take a long time. This depends on their temperament, their age at the time you start socializing them, as well as the amount of time you put into socializing them. Under socialized kittens can make wonderful companions **provided** you can give them the time and energy needed to teach them to trust.

The adopter of an under socialized kitten will need to make sure their expectations are in keeping with the temperament of the kitten. Most of these kitties will be comfortable with their primary owners, and a few other familiar people, but will remain shy of strangers and new situations due to early imprinting.

## What Do Cautious Kittens Need?

1. Patient owners with time to work with them daily. This “work” will involve **lots of gentle handling and play with interactive toys**. You don't have to be home all day, but the kitten does need focused attention when you are home. Routine and consistency does wonders.
2. A small safe place at first. This can be a small quiet room or a bathroom. This will help your kitty adjust to you and her new home gradually. A larger space will be overwhelming for her, and she will find spaces to hide that may not be easy to access. So help her out and give her a little safe place to hide. When she's used to you, you can gradually increase her living space (see “Tips” below).
3. A relatively quiet home will be easier to adjust to for a scared kitten. A household with multiple people, especially if includes transitory people as do many roommate situations, is going to be more difficult for this type of kitten.

## What About Children?

These kitties tend to be better matches for homes with no young children, since children do not have the patience required to bring them out of their shell, and may scare them with loud noises and sudden movements. Older children, over the age of five, are usually fine if counseled as to appropriate ways of handling the new member of the family. The household should be a relatively quiet one in terms of noise and movement though. Too much foot traffic would be overwhelming for a scared kitty.

## What About Other Cats?

As with any new kitten or cat that you take home, you should make the introduction to your resident cat gradually. Cats are territorial animals, and need time and space to adjust to changes in their territory. Generally speaking, it takes at least a few weeks to successfully integrate a new cat into your household.

## Indoors or Outdoors?

Because of their timid nature, they should be kept indoors for life. An undersocialized cat is more likely to run away if frightened by street noises or strangers, and may not return. They have learned survival skills from their mother early on, and are quite adept at hiding during the day, and only coming out at night. Often they will be too scared to come to their owner and will need to be trapped with a humane trap. Your cat will be happy living an indoor-only life as long as you provide her with the stimulation and exercise that she needs.

## Tips on Socializing Scared Kittens:

- Confine to a small room with a litterbox, food and water, and a few safe hiding places that you can access easily. You don't want to chase the kitty all over the room- and reaching under a bed can be hard- so make sure the only "hiding places" available to the kitten are ones that you can reach into easily (such as a carrier with a towel or blanket inside). Cardboard boxes work really well for this, as well. If possible, have a radio or TV playing in the room, this can acclimate her to "normal" noise and work as white noise to block out any scary sounds coming from other places in the house.
- Move slowly and talk softly when approaching the kitten. Get down closer to her level when possible. Don't force her to interact if she's not ready, work with toys and wet food well before you try to pet her or pick her up. Spend time in the room, just talking to her or reading to her so that she can get used to you being there.
- Use food to make friends! Make sure you feed at set times, so she associates you with food. It may help at first to have just one or two people do this, so the kitten can bond strongly with core caregivers. Try using wet food or treats to tempt the kitten close to you. Feed them the food off of a spoon or tongue depressor but don't try to pet them until they're reliably staying close to you during feedings. Pet the kitten gently around the face and cheeks as her confidence blossoms and she stays close for feedings.
- Use toys to build confidence, for exercise, and as a fun way to bond. Playing with a kitten with a wand toy is a great way to bring them close to you without pressuring them to interact or be petted. The best toys are the interactive kind, like feather wand toys and cat-dancers. Make sure there are plenty of toys out for the kitten to play with on their own, as well. If the kitten stays close after a play session, reward her with treats or wet food and pet gently as much as she'll allow.
- Handle the kitty with care. Once she's coming into your space reliably, you can pet her more and more but allow her to retreat as needed. Tempt her back with food or toys and try to pet some more. When she's ready, wrap her in a towel and pick her up gently, hold/cradle her until she relaxes in your arms. If she struggles to get away, let her go and try again at another time. As she grows more comfortable with you, get her used to being petted all over. When she's older, you will want to be able to trim her nails- get her used to having her paws handled at a young age.
- Gradually introduce the kitten to the rest of the home under your supervision after she's grown to trust you. One new room at a time is best. If she's overwhelmed, put her back in her "safe" room.

- Gradually introduce her to new people, using the same slow and steady methods that you've used with her. Make sure not to traumatize her by putting her in a situation that is beyond her capacity - such as a loud dinner party!
- Make the carrier a nice place! Whatever carrier you choose, keep it out and let the kitty get used to going in of her own accord. Cardboard carriers can be laid on their side with a little towel to lie on placed inside. You can put little bits of kibble (dry food) in there as treats. This will make necessary trips and veterinarian visits easier on kitty.
- Remember: an under socialized kitten is still a kitten! Do not be taken in by the fact that they seem "mellow" in the shelter- this is because they are scared. At home, once comfortable (and often at night) they will likely be just as playful and active as other kittens.
- As with any kitten, it is important not to allow or encourage play-biting. Do not wrestle with your kitten or use your fingers as toys. Cats should learn early on that hands are for petting, not biting. Under socialized kittens can get very confused and potentially aggressive if handled incorrectly. It's also common for under socialized kittens to play inappropriately because they haven't learned how to play from littermates or mom. Use wand toys to encourage proper play, always keeping kitten active but away from hands and arms. Reward proper play and redirect with proper toys when/ if kitten becomes overstimulated.
- Socialization takes time. Give the kitten at least a few 20-minute "visits" a day or more if possible.

### **A Note On Kitten-Proofing Your Home:**

Kittens (and cats) are very good at making themselves small, and sneaking into places that seem impossible to us. Scared kittens look for such places, and it is very important to block off all holes and spaces, such as under the refrigerator or stove, before allowing your kitten into a room. Windows that are not screened should never be left ajar, and screens should be checked carefully to ensure that the cat cannot push them out. Also make sure that toxic substances, such as cleaning materials, are stored in a place the kitten cannot access. You will need to watch that your kitten not chew or play with electrical cords. You can use cord-covers to prevent this behavior. You will also want to make sure that any household plants you have are not toxic to cats, as cats often like to chew on plants.