

## FEARFUL KITTEN SOCIALIZATION 101

THESE RECOMMENDATIONS AND TECHNIQUES CAN ALSO BE USED TO HELP FEARFUL ADULT CATS

### CREATE A SANCTUARY ROOM/COMFORTABLE ENVIRONMENT

- Separate room away from other pets
- Kitten proofing (covering up vents, clearing shelves, using an appropriately sized cage, etc)
- Hiding spaces- Provide plenty of safe hiding places so the kitten(s) don't need to hide under the bed and in corners where they may get hurt and you can't see them. Safe hiding places can be paper bags without handles, cat carriers, boxes, shoeboxes, tunnels, and more.
- Calm environment- To create a scent friendly environment, you can plug in a feliway diffuser. Do not change linens unless they are dirty. Keep your scents to a minimum when interacting with the kitten (cig smoke, cats, dogs, perfume)
- High places - Cats have an instinctual need to see things from up high, a behavior that is rooted in the fact that cats are both small predators and prey. High places can be cat trees or the top of a carrier.
- Litter boxes – Litterboxes should be low so the kitten can easily enter and leave, can mix in soil with litter to help kitten adjust although many kittens will use the litterbox. Using the litterbox is instinct, cats do not need to be trained to use the box. If they are missing the box, it's most likely not accessible, they do not like substrate, or because of medical issues. Avoid using pellet litter, this is not natural and not setting up the kittens for success. Most caregivers do not use this litter and most cats do not prefer it due to it being hard, unnatural, and not comfortable on their paws. If kitten has wounds, use shredded paper not yesterday's news.
- Kittens need to scratch (various vertical and horizontal scratchers- different scratching substrates)
- Limit the amount you turn lights on and off- Light is an environmental cue that allows confined cats to become accustomed to daily activities. Lights need to be controlled by a timer that provides a predictable light-dark cycle from day to day if natural light cannot be provided. If a timer is not possible, then turn lights on and off manually at the same time each day.
- Bedding (soft blankets, beds, resting places)
- Heated cat beds
- Calming Music: Through a Cats Ear, Pet Acoustics Pet Tunes Feline speaker. Avoid playing the radio or the news since what plays is uncontrolled and can cause stress.
- Add enrichment that stimulates all 5 senses (see enrichment handout)



### ROUTINE

- Create structure and stability for your kitten. Creating a stable, safe environment will go a long way in helping your kitten overcome her fears.
- Routine is important for cats just like it is for humans. Do your best to be predictable and as consistent as possible (e.g. clean litterboxes, feed, play sessions around the same time daily)
- Provide positive, consistent and predictable human-cat interactions (Learn individual cat's preference for contact – note it for others (does he love being brushed, picked up, sitting on lap, played with etc)

## RESPECT



### HOW TO GREET A CAT

Using Proper Cat Etiquette  
#ASKFIRST

- Assess the cat's body language
- Move calmly and speak in quiet tones
- Extend out finger or soft hand
- If the cat rubs into you, that is them saying, "please pet me"
- If the cat sniffs and walks away, no insult to you, but they do not want to be petted right now
- Cats prefer gentle stroking on their head, shoulder, and cheek area
- Let the cat initiate, choose, and control the type of human contact
- When the cat ends the interaction, do not pursue more
- Avoid direct eye contact



Don't force contact with the kitten, let them come to you. Think like a feral kitten including allowing the kitten to be scared. Reset to his/her needs

Greet your cat kindly, monitor their body language and respect their space

- You must monitor your cat's body language and at the first sight of agitation and/or over arousal, you should give them space and stop petting.
- Some common signs (i.e. red flags) of over arousal are tail twitching and lashing, ears and whiskers back, skin twitching, crouching low to the ground, hair standing up on the body and/or tail, looking at your hand, and fixated gaze/stare.
- See feline body language handouts

## BODY LANGUAGE



- Tail moving rapidly back and forth (this can include just the tip of the tail or progress to whole tail)
- Dilated pupils
- Acute stopping of purring
- Meowing
- Skin twitching
- Shifting body position
- Growling
- Cat looking at your hand
- Ears to the side or back
- Hair standing up (this can be subtle and hard to notice, hairs standing up on just part of the body)

## END ON A POSITIVE NOTE WITH YOUR CAT

- Only pet the cat if they approach you and solicit attention (see above infographic)
- The best way to help a cat feel more comfortable with being petted is to pay attention to their tolerance level so you can stop petting well in-advance of an attack. Pay attention to their body language and stop petting before the warning signals start appearing. For example, if you know that you can typically pet your cat for about three minutes before they bite, then in order to keep this a positive experience, stop petting after about a minute-and-a-half. When you stop petting while the experience is still positive then it breaks that chain where your cat feels the only way to end the session is to be aggressive. At the very least, stop petting the second you see the first body language red flag.
- Don't wrestle with your cat or use glove toys. We don't want to associate play with your hands. Roughhousing can lead to over-arousal, where your cat begins scratching and biting.
- Use laser toys appropriately. Laser toys can get your cat to move around and get exercise but can be frustrating since your cat will never catch their "prey." When you play with a laser toy, end the play session with a small amount of wet food or treats so your cat has something tangible to catch.
- Short petting sessions with petting around the head rather than down the back.
- If they are attacking your leg or hand, although it will be difficult, avoid yelling or sudden movements as this will escalate the behavior. Freeze for a moment, slowly move your limb away, and redirect with a treat/toy.

## GETTING COMFORTABLE

These steps need to be done before petting/holding kitten. They need to be comfortable with you sitting, standing, and moving in the room. You pet the kitten only when THEY solicit attention.

1

**I RECOMMEND FINDING HIGH VALUE REINFORCERS AND BEGIN "PICNICKING".**

Picnicking: Find a high value reinforcer for kitten. At the same time each day, enter room using considerate approach, leave treat and exit room. You are creating a positive and consistent interaction with the kitten by coming in, placing a treat gently, and then exiting. The kitten may not eat in front of you at first and that is ok! As you continue to do this, you will notice the kitten eating as you leave, eating in front of you, and eventually coming out to greet you. We go to the next step once the kitten is comfortable with you being in the room.

2

**CLICKER TRAINING IS A WONDERFUL WAY TO BUILD TRUST IN FEARFUL KITTENS.**

Clicker training is quicker than trying to calm or reassure the cat with social attention since most fearful kittens do not enjoy it. Clicker games teach cats how to interact appropriately with humans. Confidence replaces fear. The kitten discovers new skills and learns to adapt to new events.

1. Fearful animals are more sensitive to sound so you can use a baby food or Snapple bottle cap as a clicker. Assess the kitten's response to these sounds prior to the sessions.
2. Assess the response of the clicker. You may want to avoid clicking sounds when first starting the exercise.
3. Approach the cage or area the kitten is in, click, toss treat (or use wooden or plastic backscratcher to gently place) as far as you can into the cage, step back quietly. You are teaching the cat that the "click" not only means treats but also means "this scary person who is too close to me steps away". Repeat 3-4 times even if the cat does not eat the treat. Leave the treats in the cage and come back later. Did the kitten eat the treats while you were gone, great!
4. As the kitten begins to accept the treat, continue to approach the cage, click, and toss the treat progressively closer and closer to the front of the cage, and step back quietly.
5. If the kitten is doing well, let the kitten finish the food while you stand there. Now do not click: just stand still and watch for any voluntary movement towards the front of the cage. Click during that movement, place treat, and step back.
6. This helps the kitten feel safe and in control of the situation. After a few more clicks and treats for the forward movement, you can stop stepping backwards.
7. Now, you can continue to use capturing and introduce the target stick.

# 3

## BEGIN CAPTURING THE KITTEN MOVING TOWARDS YOU OR RELAXING IN YOUR PRESENCE

Capturing: Capturing is waiting for the kitten to perform a behavior without a cue. When capturing behavior, you are not directing the cat in any way. You are simply observing the cat and choosing to click and reinforce when they complete a behavior that you want to see happen again. Capturing is a method that works well when you are reinforcing behaviors that a cat does naturally. We use capturing to reinforce looking at us, coming towards us, paw towards us, movement towards us, slow-blinking and other relaxed behaviours. Below is an example of capturing for eye contact.

Click for looking at you, movement towards you, or walking towards you.  
Wait for eye contact

Next, wait for your cat to look at you. When she does, click and treat. Your cat is already starting to make the connection that when she offers the behavior of eye contact, you click, and she gets a reward.  
Click for eye contact

For the remainder of your training session, every time your cat looks at you, click and offer food to the side to reset her. Be ready to deliver those treats quickly, and to click as soon as she looks back at you. End the training session on a positive note by tossing a treat. Keep sessions short 1-3 minutes.

**TARGETING:** (See handout) You will need a clicker, I usually recommend a quiet clicker like a Snapple or baby food cap or pen for fearful kittens since a traditional clicker may be too loud. If you were going use a clicker, I recommend using an iclick or Klik-R which are quieter clickers, or you can make a clicking sound with your tongue.

# 4

When starting, use a target object like a pencil, click stick or chopstick and later work up to your finger. With fearful kittens, distance is our friend and they will be more likely to approach an object rather than you. Work up to using a finger based on kitten's comfort level.

## TIPS FOR SUCCESS

1. Make a plan: Small steps
2. Choose reinforcers the kitten loves
3. Pair each step with a positive consequence
4. Go at a pace the kitten is comfortable with
5. Stay under threshold
6. End on a positive note



# COUNTER CONDITIONING AND DESENSITIZATION

**Counter-conditioning** means changing the pet's emotional response, feelings or attitude toward a stimulus. Classical counter-conditioning would be accomplished by pairing the sight, sounds and approach of a person with one of the cat's favored rewards to change the emotional state to one that is calm and positive.

**Desensitization** is the gradual exposure of a kitten to the stimuli or a situation that frightens them, beginning at such a low level that they do not react at all and slowly increasing the level of exposure without provoking a stress response, with the goal of reducing or eliminating fear, anxiety, or stress.

We will be using counter conditioning and desensitization to help the kitten get more comfortable with touch, handling, and other stimuli and situations they are fearful of. To start, find a high value reinforcer that is only used for these sessions. When getting them more comfortable with touch, place the food down and don't begin until they are eating and showing minimal to no signs of stress.

Here is an example of a plan. Sessions should only be 1-3 minutes, and these can be done 2-3 times daily.

Remember the "Tips for Success" above when doing these sessions. Recording them and working with a behavior professional is very helpful. Every cat is an individual and they may be comfortable with only steps 1-4 in the first session or even fewer steps.



## Under Threshold

The cat acknowledges the stimulus but is not concerned or worried about it.

### The cat is:

- Eager to eat the food you present and stay close to you.
- Demonstrating relaxed body language.



## Over Threshold

The cat demonstrates signs of fear and anxiety to the stimulus presented.

### The cat is:

- Not interested in the food.
- Scratching during the training.
- Hesitant to Approach.
- Crouching close to the floor.

Photo Credit: catschool.co.

## COUNTER CONDITIONING AND DESENSITIZATION TO TOUCH EXAMPLE PLAN

1. Walk towards the kitten
2. Stand to the side of kitten
3. Sit to the side of kitten
4. Place hand near kitten
5. Touch kitten (shoulder, face, and under chin only to start) for 2 seconds
6. Increase length of touch
7. Pet kitten shoulder, face, and under chin
8. Stroke kitten from shoulders to tail (once)
9. Stroke kitten twice

## PATIENCE

**Be prepared for two steps forward, five steps back.** It takes a while and a lot of testing on her part to truly trust you. Remember to go at a pace the kitten is comfortable with, assess body language, and keep the kitten under threshold (showing little to no signs of fear or stress).

Let them show you who they are, accept their quirks and limits, and you will have a friend for life.

## VIRTUAL CONSULTING, SEMINARS AND WORKSHOPS

Attending group seminars is a great cost-efficient way for you and your team to get access to up to date, scientifically proven techniques in animal behavior. Seminars and lectures are available for the general public, veterinary professionals, training and behavior professionals, and shelter professionals. Inquire today at [chirrupsandchatter.com](http://chirrupsandchatter.com)!

## FINAL NOTE ON HOW NOT TO SOCIALIZE



This is an example of how NOT to socialize, especially a fearful kitten. Socialization involves introducing a kitten to a variety of stimuli, so they learn their world and everything in it is safe. When introducing different stimuli, it should be a 100% positive and pleasant experience for them which often does not happen and, instead of socializing, the person floods the kitten. Flooding means you are exposing an animal to scary or unpleasant stimuli over threshold. This, likely results in increased fear and anxiety.



### Flooding

If you were afraid of spiders and I threw you in a room of spiders, you are most likely going to be more fearful of spiders and your fear may generalize. You may just see a dust ball and panic like you would if it was a real spider.

For the kittens pictured above, their body language cannot be observed. They may be frozen in fear, stuck in a place that they can't get away from and simultaneously exposed to various scary and new stimuli. Also, with socialization, you expose them to small amounts of stimuli at a time, not everything around you. This is the opposite of positive socialization experiences.

Instead, assess the kitten's body language while introducing them to stimuli at a pace they are comfortable with and verifying the exposure to new things is pleasant.

## ABOUT ME



Tabitha Kucera is an elite fear free and low stress handling certified RVT, CCBC, and KPA-CTP. She is the owner of Chirrup and Chatter cat and dog behavior consulting and training. She loves educating through writing, behavior consulting, and lecturing on all things cats including fear free, kitten socialization, feline friendly handling, working with fearful animals, and more. She enjoys the opportunity to help people better understand and relate to cats.



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