

How to Socialize Very Shy or Fearful Cats

By Terri Gonzales and Sherry Woodard

FERAL (/FERAL)



This resource offers a step-by-step method for socializing cats. This process was created to help very shy or fearful cats who came from the Great Kitty Rescue, a hoarding situation in Pahrump, Nevada where hundreds of neglected cats were saved.

Table of Contents

Preparation

1. About the cage
2. Setting up the cage
3. Tools you may need
4. Cats' body language
5. Recording your progress

The lessons

1. Motivating the cat with food
2. Petting with the wand
3. Petting with the brush wand
4. Petting with the wand and a glove or hand
5. Petting with a glove or hand
6. Picking up a cat in the cage
7. Taking a cat out of the cage for lap time
8. Spending time in the playroom
9. Spending time in the real-life room

Graduation and going home

Appendix (<http://resc-files-prod.s3-us-west-1.amazonaws.com/Cat-Socialization-Form-Appendix.pdf>)

In 2007, Best Friends was called in to help out with a terrible hoarding situation in Pahrump, Nevada. Hundreds of neglected and abused cats were living in a barren compound in the middle of the desert — and local animal control officers knew they needed help. When Best Friends staff and volunteers arrived at the site of what was to become known as the Great Kitty Rescue, their first priority was getting food, water and medical care to the cats. But, when the dust settled, they realized they had a lot of very scared cats on their hands. We're talking about cats who hid from and avoided people, cats who might be considered feral by some.

The socialization process you're about to learn was born out of necessity. There were around 800 cats at the Great Kitty Rescue and Best Friends staff were determined to socialize as many of them as possible, so the kitties could get rid of their fear, become house cats and find forever homes. Based on their trial-and-error experiences with the cats of the Great Kitty Rescue, Best Friends staff and volunteers used a series of steps for socializing extremely shy or fearful cats.

The socialization process was dubbed Miss Sherry's Finishing School for Felines. The primary objective of the socialization process is to help cats face their fears and overcome them. How does it work? First, the cats are housed individually in small cages. Now, this may seem harsh, but Best Friends staff discovered that the cats actually feel safer in a small, enclosed space. Plus, it gives caregivers access to the cats so the process of learning to trust people can begin. Left to their own devices in a large open space, fearful cats will run and hide when people appear — and the process of building trust can't happen.

Once the cats are in the cages, they are taken through a series of lessons. Working with one cat at a time, the caregiver insists, gently and persistently, on making contact with the cat, using various “tools” like food, feather wands and long-handled brushes. These steps are followed by slowly taking the cat out of the cage and holding him/her for some lap time. Then the cat graduates to the playroom and the real-life room. When the cat becomes comfortable with one step, the caregiver and cat move on to the next step.

The techniques used by the Great Kitty Rescue team are based on routine, repetition, slow and gentle persuasion, small progressions from one step to another, and ending each session on a positive note. The ultimate goal is to help the cats make good decisions so they can let go of their fearfulness, replace it with trust in people and eventually find homes of their own.

During the socialization process, you’ll want to do six to eight sessions per day with each cat, with sessions in the beginning lasting one to three minutes. Depending on what the cat is working on and what the cat can tolerate, the length of sessions will vary. For example, the introduction of a wand will generally require less time than a lap session. The length of a petting session could depend on whether the cat is new to petting versus familiar with it (coming forward in the cage and soliciting petting from people).

Continuity is another important aspect of the socialization process. Once you start the process, make sure you work with the cat every day. Skipping a few days of interaction with the cat can cause him to lose momentum and you’ll be repeating steps unnecessarily.

As you go through the steps, remember that every cat is different. Each cat will progress at a different rate, so you need to take your cues from the cat. Pay close attention to the cat’s body language (more details on this below). Treat each cat as an individual and develop a relationship with each cat on that basis.

Disclaimer

The socialization process described below is a work in progress. Best Friends hasn’t tested these techniques scientifically. They are offered here with the caveat that they are based solely on observation and experimentation by Best Friends staff and volunteers during the Great Kitty Rescue. We welcome any helpful input from others who have successfully socialized fearful cats.

Caution

The techniques described in this manual should only be performed by experienced professionals. Cats can bite, scratch and attack handlers, causing bodily injury to those using these techniques. Safety equipment, including gloves, safety glasses, and protective clothing, is highly recommended

while using these techniques. Best Friends Animal Society is not responsible for any injuries to anyone using these techniques. Any person using the techniques described in this manual does so at his/her own risk.

Preparation

About the cage

The cage gives the cat a place to feel safe. Limiting the cat's space is necessary to allow interaction with the cat and to help the cat learn new skills. If you don't limit the cat's space, he will avoid interaction. The cage will be the cat's bedroom until she's no longer fearful around people and has completed the socialization training process.

At the Great Kitty Rescue, caregivers tried various cage sizes. You should experiment to see what works best for you, but you probably don't want a cage much larger than 2 feet deep, 20 inches wide, 20 inches tall. If the cage is too large, you won't be able to interact with the cat comfortably and the cat will be able to avoid interaction. The cage shouldn't be smaller than the measurements above, however, because the cat needs to be able to get up, stretch and move around a bit.

You'll want to use a wire cage that's open on all sides. If you're working with a cat who's particularly fearful, you could cover one side, but don't cover the whole thing because that allows the cat to hide. The cage should have a slide-out litter tray to make cleaning easier.

Setting up the cage

First, put some bedding toward the back of the cage. The bedding should be something soft but flat, so the cat doesn't hide under it. The litter tray should be in the front of the cage by the door, giving the cat the feeling that the back of the cage is a safe place. The water and food dishes should attach to the sides of the cage. If the cat is new to a cage, allow him at least a day to get comfortable in the cage before starting the lessons.

Tools you may need

Feather wands. It's good to have a variety of feather wands (available at pet supply stores) so you can use the one that works best with each cat. Feather wands vary in the amount of feathers they have. Some have feathers just at the tip and others have feathers covering several inches of the wand. Neutral colors seem to work best.

Plastic wand. Take a plastic wand and wrap one end in cloth, to create something that looks like a large Q-tip.

Long-handled brush. You'll use the brush as a wand.

Treats. If the cat is food-motivated, treats like baby food, turkey deli meat and canned tuna work best. Always give the food-motivated cat a treat at the end of a session. The amount should be about a teaspoon of baby food or a few pieces of canned tuna or deli meat.

Leather garden gloves. To stay safe during the beginning steps, wear leather garden gloves. If the cat is big and strong, get welding gloves, but use the welding gloves for as short a time as possible because cats are afraid of the size of the gloves. You should try to switch to the smaller leather gloves as soon as it is safe for you.

Pheromones. Pheromones are chemicals excreted by cats to mark their territory. In some cats, pheromones may help to reduce stress and aggression. Feliway (available in pet supply stores) is one brand: It's a synthetic version of the cat pheromone that comes in a pump spray. You can spray a bit on the tip of a wand before you touch the cat with the wand.

Cats' body language

You can pick up a lot of cues from the cat to determine how she's feeling. During each session, watch the cat closely for signs of what her body language is telling you. The lists below give examples of what kitty body language means, but each cat is an individual, so try to keep in mind that these are general guidelines only.

Relaxed or curious body language:

- Cat returns your blink
- Whiskers forward
- Both ears up
- Smelling
- Tucks front paws under body
- Lying down or sitting in a relaxed posture
- Grooming
- Purring
- Kneading
- Soliciting attention
- Rubbing head against hand or object
- Rubbing against the cage

Undecided or nervous body language:

- One ear up and one back
- Licking lips
- Ears up with stiff body
- Hissing
- Looking away
- Lying firmly against the back of the cage

Scared or fearful body language:

- Wide-eyed stare
- Ears down
- Whiskers back
- Hissing
- Growling
- Biting
- Holding a front paw up
- Standing with weight on one front paw
- Striking
- Lying down with head low, head and body stiff

Recording your progress

To keep track of how the cat is doing, you'll want to record the specifics of the cat's progress every day. Best Friends has created forms that you can use to do this (see the [appendix \(http://resc-files-prod.s3-us-west-1.amazonaws.com/Cat-Socialization-Form-Appendix.pdf\)](http://resc-files-prod.s3-us-west-1.amazonaws.com/Cat-Socialization-Form-Appendix.pdf)). If you're working with a number of cats, it's especially important to have a written "report card" for each cat.

Tip

A scared cat can cause serious injury. To be safe, wear gloves when you first start working with a cat. Continue to wear gloves until you find out what the cat's reaction will be with each step.

[Back to top](#)

The lessons

Here are the lessons the cat will go through:

1. Motivating the cat with food
2. Petting with the wand
3. Petting with the brush wand
4. Petting with the wand and a glove or hand
5. Petting with a glove or hand
6. Picking up a cat in the cage
7. Taking a cat out of the cage for lap time
8. Spending time in the playroom
9. Spending time in the real-life room

Each lesson will now be described in detail. Useful tips are provided at the end of each lesson. Please read through all the lessons and tips before starting the socialization process.

Lesson 1: Motivating the cat with food

The goal of lesson 1 is to have an initial positive interaction with the cat. Offering food can bring about positive interaction from a very shy or aggressive cat, but keep in mind that not all cats are motivated by food. To find out if a cat is food-motivated, place a small amount of baby food or deli meat on the end of a wand (the end without the feathers or cloth).

Slowly move the food tip of the wand about halfway into the cage, resting the wand just past the far edge of the cat box. Wait to see if the cat will smell or lick the food. If not, slowly move the wand toward the cat's nose. You want the cat to lick – not bite – the baby food or gently eat the deli meat. This may take some practice on the cat's part.

Even if the cat is food-motivated, he may not want to accept any food from you in the beginning. In that case, go to step 2, but continue to offer the baby food or deli meat on the wand at the beginning of each session. One day, the kitty may surprise you!

Give the cat a treat every time you finish a session. The cat will come to associate a positive outcome (a treat) with your interaction. The treat can be a teaspoon of baby food, deli meat or tuna. In the beginning, before you've established trust, the cat will most likely eat the treat after you have left the area.

If you are working with a food-motivated cat and you are using deli meat or another type of meat during the sessions, you'll need to watch for meat aggressiveness. This behavior can occur when the cat is becoming more comfortable with the sessions, but it can also happen in the beginning.

Whenever you offer a food-motivated cat a piece of meat (from a wand, gloved hand or bare hand), notice how the cat takes it. If the cat is meat-aggressive, he'll grab it, possibly growling while he's eating or after he eats the meat. When you come back into the cage using a wand or your hand, the

cat might grab at your hand, sometimes growling and threatening to bite. Test the cat by going back into the cage with another piece of meat.

If the cat seems even more aggressive about the meat, don't use meat to work with the cat. The aggressive behavior will only get worse and the cat will stop interacting positively with you. For the meat-aggressive cat, use only baby food as treats. Baby food has to be licked and it seems to work better with meat-aggressive cats.

Tips

- Talk to the cat in a soothing voice while you are working with him. Use the cat's name often and let him know what you are going to do. Reassure the cat that it's going to be OK.
- Go slow. With each step, give the cat time to process what's happening and make good decisions.
- If the cat strikes at the wand tipped with baby food, reapply the food and try again. The cat will often regret hitting the food. Give her a chance to change her mind.
- If the cat is food-motivated, always use lesson 1 a number of times to reinforce for the cat that it's time to socialize. In a short time, the cat will begin to look forward to the interaction.
- Watch the cat's reaction and body language. The cat will let you know what he's feeling. (See the list of body language signs above.)
- If the cat strikes or bites, try not to react or pull away. (We know this is difficult!) A strong reaction from you can give the cat the impression that his behavior was successful: He has forced you to retreat.
- Keep an eye on where the cat's eyes are. Wherever she's looking may be her target for biting or striking out.

Lesson 2: Petting with the wand

The goal of lesson 2 is to get the cat comfortable with the wand and your presence with the cage door open. Look for small positive signs at first: the cat smelling the wand; the cat tolerating touch on the head with the wand, even for a few seconds. You'll work from petting the top of the cat's head with the wand to petting the back of his neck, his back, the side of his head and his chin.

Here are the steps:

- Start with lesson 1 (food motivation) to help the cat make the transition to lesson 2.
- Then, take the bare end of a feather or cloth-tipped wand and move it slowly into the cage, stopping about halfway into the cage. Watch the cat's reaction (see tips above on body language).
- Let the cat smell the wand. If the cat attempts to bite the wand, stop moving the wand for a few seconds; if necessary, move the wand so the cat cannot bite it. If the cat continues to attempt to bite the wand, move it out of the cage. You don't want a confrontation with the cat. Go back into the cage with baby food on the wand and allow the cat to lick the baby food.
- Bring the wand back into the cage with the feather or cloth tip toward the cat. Let the cat smell the wand.
- Bring the wand up to the top of the cat's head and attempt to touch the cat lightly with the feather or cloth end of the wand. Starting at the top of the head between the ears (the forehead area), gently pet the cat. If the cat is receptive, work your way down the cat's back. Next, pet around the side of the cat's head and chin area.
- If the cat hisses or strikes, pull back a little, wait a few seconds and try again. Even if you only get to touch the top of the cat's head, that's progress. Next session, you may be able to pet the back of the cat's head.
- If the cat continues to react negatively, then go back to a previous action to which she reacted positively and end the session. Some cats are resistant in the beginning of a new lesson, so you may have to do this repeatedly.

Be patient!

You want to end each session positively, so give the cat a treat when you've finished a session. The treat can be a teaspoon of baby food or a few pieces of canned tuna or deli meat.

When the cat is receptive to petting with the wand, go to lesson 3.

Tips

- Talk to the cat in a soothing voice while you are working with him. Use the cat's name often and let him know what you are going to do. Reassure the cat that it's going to be OK.
- Spray the wand with a pheromone like Feliway or touch the wand (feather or cloth end) on some turkey deli meat. The scents make the wand more inviting to the cat.
- When you open the cage door, sit or stand in front of the door. Most of the time, this will prevent the cat from jumping out of the cage and will help the cat get comfortable with your presence.
- Some cats are mesmerized when you touch them on the forehead (between the eyes) with a wand. Other cats may hate being touched on the face or head.

Lesson 3: Petting with the brush wand

This lesson involves using a long-handled brush wand or something similar. Many cats enjoy being touched with this type of brush, and it will help protect you the first few times you attempt to pet the cat with your glove or hand (in the next lesson).

Here are the steps:

- Start with lesson 1 (food motivation) to help the cat make the transition to a new lesson.
- Take the brush wand and move it slowly into the cage. Watch the cat's reaction (see tips above on body language). Allow the cat to smell the brush.
- Bring the brush wand up to the top of the cat's head and attempt to lightly touch her with the brush wand. Starting at the top of the head between the ears (the forehead area), gently pet the cat. If the cat is receptive, work your way down her back. Next, pet around the side of her head and chin area.
- If the cat hisses or strikes, pull back a little, wait a few seconds and try again. Even if you only get to touch the top of the cat's head, that's progress. Next session, you may be able to pet the back of the cat's head.
- If the cat continues to react negatively, then go back to a previous action to which she reacted positively and try again. Some cats are resistant in the beginning of a new lesson, so you may have to do this repeatedly. Be patient!
- End the session on a positive note by giving the cat her treat.

When the cat is receptive to petting with the brush wand (or wand of your choice), go to lesson 4.

Tips

- Talk to the cat in a soothing voice while you are working with him. Use the cat's name often and let him know what you are going to do. Reassure the cat that it's going to be OK.
- Try various wands and long-handled brushes, and learn where each cat likes to be touched.
- In each session, make sure that the last interaction you have with the cat is a positive one.

Lesson 4: Petting with the wand and a glove or hand

In this lesson, you'll introduce the cat to human touch. The goal is to be able to pet the cat from head to tail with your hand while the wand is in place. As in the previous lessons, you'll accomplish this by building upon small successes. Learning to enjoy human touch is a big step for the cat.

In the beginning sessions for this lesson, you should wear a glove for protection. Use a wand that is rigid enough to give you protection while you're petting the cat. The brush wand works well for this. You might also want to review the body language tips given above.

Here are the steps:

- Start with lesson 1 (food motivation) to help the cat make the transition to a new lesson.
- Hold the wand with the hand that is on the same side as the cat's head. This is very, very important. If the cat's head is on your right, then the wand should be in your right hand. Why? Because you want your other hand (the one that you'll be petting with) to be as far as possible from the cat's head and front paws, to help prevent injury to your hand if the cat bites or strikes.
- Take the brush wand and move it slowly into the cage, just as you did in lesson 3. Watch the cat's reaction.
- Allow the cat to smell the brush.
- Bring the brush wand up to the top of the cat's head and pet the cat with the wand.
- Work your way down to the back of the cat's neck with the wand. Hold the wand across the back of the cat's neck with a little pressure. (This will help protect your other hand when you move it into the cat's range. If the cat turns her head to bite, she'll bite the wand, giving you time to move your hand to a safer place.)

- Now that the wand is in position, you want the cat to see you slowly bringing your petting hand into the cage. The cat may hiss, but continue moving your hand slowly into the cage and talking reassuringly to the cat.
- Try to touch the back of the cat near the tail area first. If she hisses, stop moving your hand for a second, but then proceed to touch the back of the cat. The idea is to complete the movement of your hand, even if it is only to lightly touch the cat's back for a few seconds. You want to help the cat decide that a touch from you will not hurt.
- If the cat continues to react negatively, then go back to a previous action to which she reacted positively and try again. If the situation becomes unsafe (the cat tries to bite or strikes), remove your hand and go back to petting with the wand only. Some cats are resistant in the beginning of a new lesson, so you may have to do this repeatedly. Be patient!
- End the session on a positive note by giving the cat a treat.

Each time you have a session, gently touch and pet the cat a little more. As mentioned above, please use a glove in the beginning. When you feel comfortable that the cat is becoming more receptive to your touch, then remove the glove and use your bare hand.

When the cat is receptive to petting with your hand with the presence of the brush wand, go to lesson 5.

Tips

- Talk to the cat in a soothing voice while you are working with him. Use the cat's name often and let him know what you are going to do. Reassure the cat that it's going to be OK.
- In this lesson, it's particularly important to watch the cat's body language very closely. A cat can cause serious injury, so you'll want to recognize the signs that he's about to strike.
- If the cat looks away when you pet him, he may be "in denial." The touch is scary, so he's pretending that you're not touching him. You'll want to make sure the cat is watching your hand as you reach to touch and pet him. If the cat is not acknowledging what is happening, and facing his fear, you may have difficulty when you move on to lesson 5 (using your hand only).
- Notice whether the cat seems sensitive to touch on a particular area of her body, such as the chin or tail. Don't avoid touching these areas, just work more carefully and gently with these spots.
- In each session, make sure that the last interaction you have with the cat is a positive one.

Lesson 5: Petting with a glove or hand

In this lesson, you'll progress to petting the cat with just a glove or hand, without the presence of the wand. To do this, you'll need to use food as motivation.

Here are the steps:

- Put baby food or deli meat on the tip of your gloved finger or your bare finger (whichever you feel more comfortable with) and move it slowly toward the cat. Stop when you reach the back of the litter box and rest your finger there with the food.
- Most of the time, the cat will come to you and begin licking the baby food or gently eating the meat. If that doesn't happen, slowly move your finger toward the cat's nose, talking in a soothing tone the whole time. Entice the cat to eat by letting him smell the food.
- Once he's eaten, slowly reach high into the cage and with one finger touch the top of the cat's head. If he reacts favorably, continue to pet the back of the cat's head. If he looks like he might raise his head to bite, you can firmly push the cat's head forward and a little down. This gives the cat a chance to change his mind and gives you a chance to move your hand out of the way.

- If the cat prefers to be touched on the back, start there and work your way toward the cat's head.
- If the cat reacts negatively at any point, go back to a spot where the cat reacted positively to your touch and try again. As always, go slow and be patient.
- End the session on a positive note by giving the cat a treat.

The places where you are able to touch and pet the cat should increase as you do more sessions. The goal is to get the cat comfortable with you petting him from head to tail with your hand.

As the cat becomes more comfortable with petting, you'll want to increase the amount of time spent on the petting session. Be careful that you don't over-stimulate the cat, however, because that might cause the cat to bite or strike. Signs of over-stimulation are the cat rolling or rubbing against you and acting over-excited, much like a cat in heat does.

Keep in mind that petting can be scary to the cat. Each cat is an individual, so you'll need to watch for what the cat can tolerate while using gentle, persistent persuasion so the cat can make progress. When the cat is comfortable with petting with your hand, go to lesson 6.

Tips

- Talk to the cat in a soothing voice while you are working with him. Use the cat's name often and let him know what you are going to do. Reassure the cat that it's going to be OK.
- In this lesson, it's particularly important to watch the cat's body language very closely. A cat can cause serious injury, so you'll want to recognize the signs that he's about to strike.
- If you feel the cat is about to strike, the top inside of the cage is the quickest and safest place for your hand to go. Most of the time, the cat will become less aggressive when you move your hand away from the cat.
- In each session, make sure that the last interaction you have with the cat is a positive one.

Lesson 6: Picking up a cat in the cage

The first attempt to pick up the cat takes place in the cage. This can be a really scary step for the cat, so be prepared for the cat to react badly.

Here are the steps:

- Start this lesson by offering the cat food on your finger. Then, pet the cat. Next, scruff the cat and gently lift her front paws off the floor of the cage for a couple of seconds. (To scruff the cat, grasp the loose skin gently but firmly at the back of the neck above the shoulder blades.) Set the cat back down and pet her again. This would be considered one session. Do this for a number of sessions.
- If these sessions do not go well, the cat is not ready to be picked up and you need to build more trust with the cat. Go back to lesson 5 and work with the cat until she's comfortable with petting and more trusting of your actions.
- Then, repeat the scruffing sequence for as many sessions as it takes for the cat to become comfortable with it.
- Next, do the first two steps (offer the cat food on your finger and pet the cat) but, instead of just scruffing the cat, put one hand on top of the cat and slide your other hand under his belly. Try to lift the cat so that all four paws leave the cage floor. Do this for a few sessions until the cat is comfortable with it.
- End the session on a positive note by giving the cat a treat.

Tips

- Talk to the cat in a soothing voice while you are working with him. Use the cat's name often and let him know what you are going to do. Reassure the cat that it's going to be OK.
- In each session, make sure that the last interaction you have with the cat is a positive one.

Lesson 7: Taking a cat out of the cage for lap time

Once you feel the cat is comfortable with being picked up inside the cage, it's time to practice picking the cat up and taking her out of the cage for lap time. Be prepared for some distress on the cat's part. The cat thinks of the cage as a safe place, so the first time you take her out of the cage, she'll most likely panic. In time, though, the cat will feel comfortable coming out of the cage, being held and being petted in your arms.

Start a session by reaching in and petting the cat. Then, pick up the cat. If the cat panics, put the cat down, pet her and try again to remove her from the cage. If the cat struggles excessively (tries to kick out of your arms or bite), she's not ready to be held. Go back to lesson 6. Don't get discouraged: Try to remember that as you practice, it will get easier for you and the cat!

There are three methods that you can use to remove the cat from the cage. Use whatever works best for you and the cat. Here are descriptions of the three methods:

Method 1. Scruff the cat with one hand; place your other hand underneath the cat and hold his front paws together with your fingers so he doesn't grab onto the cage. Lift the cat out of the cage, holding the cat's head up with the hand that's scruffing him, and set him on your lap. You can take the cat out of the cage either tail first or sideways.

Method 2. Scruff the cat, lifting her front paws off the floor. Slide your other hand between the front paws, supporting the cat's belly as you pick up the cat. Use this method only if the cat is relaxed and seems very comfortable with being picked up, and you have a very good hold on the cat. Use caution: You are sliding your arm in front of the cat's mouth.

Method 3. Scruff the cat with one hand and slide your other hand between the cat's back legs, supporting his belly. This is easier if the cat is turned away from you, with his tail facing you. The drawback to this method is that the cat will be better able to grab onto the cage as you're taking him out. You will probably have to remove his paws from the side of the cage as he comes out.

Ten to 15 seconds is a good length of time for the first session of removing the cat from the cage and placing him on your lap. You want the cat to understand and trust that you will return him to the cage, the place where he feels safe.

Before lifting the cat out of the cage, you might want to place a thick towel on your lap, to help protect you if the cat decides to "dig in." When the cat is on your lap, keep one hand on top of the cat, near the head, ready to scruff her if necessary as you pet her. Place your other hand under the cat's neck, in front of her chest. This positioning of your hands gives you better control over the cat. You will be able to feel if she's going to leap from your lap – something you don't want to happen. If the cat is struggling some, return her to the cage and try again on the next session.

In each session, hold the cat on your lap and pet her. As the cat becomes more comfortable in your lap and starts to enjoy your touch, you can lengthen the lap time. As always, pay attention to the cat's body language and be alert for signs of discomfort.

When you put the cat back in the cage, you don't want the cat to jump out of your arms and into the cage. Instead, place the cat gently back in the cage. You don't want the cat to feel like she's escaping from you.

To end positively, reach in and pet the cat after you've returned her to the cage. And don't forget to give the cat her treat after each session.

Tips

- Talk to the cat in a soothing voice while you are working with him. Use the cat's name often and let him know what you are going to do. Reassure the cat that it's going to be OK.
- Putting the cat back in the cage is easier than taking her out.
- Every action you take with a cat needs to be completed, if at all possible.
- You scruff the cat so you have better control of him. If done properly, scruffing doesn't hurt the cat and the cat seems to concede faster to being picked up. As kittens, their mothers carried them this way.

Lesson 8: Spending time in the playroom

Once the cat is enjoying being picked up and spending time on your lap, it's time for the playroom. The purpose of the playroom is to see how the cat will behave in an open area. You're hoping that the cat is now confident and trusting enough that he won't run and hide from people. In the playroom, the cat will get to interact with a number of different people. The cat will also practice getting along with other cats and learning to play.

Set up the playroom so that it has as few hiding places as possible. Cat trees need to be below your eye level and hiding spaces should be filled with towels. Provide some soft beds, some toys and some places for people to sit and pet the cats. As the cat becomes more relaxed in the playroom, have different people come in and interact with the cat to help him become comfortable with other humans besides his caregiver.

To introduce the cat to other kitties, place one or more friendly cats in the playroom. These cats will act as role models for your student. The student cat will watch your interactions with the other cats (playing, petting and picking them up) and hopefully he will be reassured that these interactions aren't scary.

The first time you put your student in the playroom, he may run from you. Give the cat about an hour to settle down and explore. If, after an hour or so, the cat hasn't found a comfortable bed and runs when you approach, try to distract him with toys, food or another cat. If the cat cannot be distracted, give him some lap time in the playroom and then return him to the cage.

The next step is supervised playroom time. Have some lap time with the cat in the playroom, and then place the cat in a cat bed next to you, continuing to pet the cat. Return the cat to the cage after this session. Repeat these sessions until the cat no longer runs from you. The goal is to give the cat

many chances to make the decision not to run.

The cat can stay in the playroom for a period of time ranging from 10 minutes to all day, depending on the cat's skill level.

Tip

Walking from the cage to the playroom may be scary for the cat and she could possibly try to jump from your arms. So, make sure you have a firm grip on her.

Lesson 9: Spending time in the real-life room

The real-life room should be set up to mimic real life. You'll want to include people furniture and other items (e.g., TV, phone, computer) that a cat would encounter in a home. You'll want to minimize hiding places, but the real-life room should have a few hiding places so you can test the cat's confidence level.

When the cat spends time in the real-life room, you're hoping that she'll approach you and solicit holding and petting. If you are sitting and reading, for example, the cat should want to see what you are doing and want to interact with you.

The real-life room also provides the cat with some new experiences she may not have had, such as the sound of a phone ringing or a radio playing. These sounds could be scary to a cat who has not lived in a home.

As in a home, the real-life room should have some places that cats can avoid you, such as under a chair or table. The test for your student: When you go to reach for the cat, she should not avoid you. If she does, she may not be ready for the real-life room.

[Back to top](#)

Graduation and going home

Congratulations! If your student has mastered all the lessons, your once-fearful cat has graduated to house-cat status. The cat has new social skills, is ready to trust, and is no longer living in fear of people or the things happening around him. Your graduate has worked very hard, and now he (or she) is ready to go home!

One caution, though: Adopters or foster parents need to be aware that they'll have to keep an eye on these kitties to make sure they aren't regressing. If one of these cats goes back to being fearful — hiding or avoiding people — it may be time for a refresher course.

If you get stuck or have questions about the socialization process described in this manual, email info@bestfriends.org (<mailto:info@bestfriends.org>).

[Back to top](#)

Sherry Woodard is the animal behavior consultant for Best Friends Animal Society. She spent many months in Pahrump, Nevada, during the Great Kitty Rescue socializing fearful cats so they could find loving homes.

Terri Gonzales also devoted several months to the Great Kitty Rescue and she helped dozens of cats overcome their fear so they could go home. She continued her work with the remaining Pahrump cats at Best Friends Animal Sanctuary. Terri was instrumental in developing the socialization techniques described in this manual.