

Cultivating Cool Cats:

Handling our feline friends so they look and feel their best in a shelter

Joan Miller

The Cat Fanciers' Association, Inc. (CFA)

Understanding cats in the shelter environment:

Basic cat nature

The “domestic cat”, as a single static entity, does not exist.

Cats have a range of lifestyles and temperaments –they are still evolving as a species

Some fundamental characteristics determine behavior in all cats; other factors influence behavior

Cats respond differently to a new environment:

Fundamental factors -

- Domestication level – feral, frantic, social
- Basic cat nature – common to all cats (caution, preference for height, curiosity, etc.)
- Genetic predisposition – pedigreed breeds, barn cats, isolated colonies
- Prior experiences - “kittenhood”, pampered pet, street cat, dog exposure, etc.

Influencing factors –

- Age of the cat, spay/neuter status, physical health
- The quality of the new environment, amount of human interaction
- Time allowed for adaptation/ transition,
- Methods used to modify undesired behavior or to enhance positive behavior

**To enhance cat behavior means helping the cat adjust to the shelter environment;
waiting until he decides when or IF he wants to adapt.**

What do most cats need and want?

- **Predictability** without monotony (feeding time, cleaning time, sleep time, play time)
- **Stimulus exposure** – non-threatening adversity to sharpen their coping skills
- **Comfort**, touch, affection; want to feel safe (small and familiar place)
- Change as a **gradual process**
- Respect for the cat’s **self governing character** – cats need to have some **choice**

Cats are motivated by *PLEASURE FOR THEMSELVES*

Assessing cats in the shelter environment:

- Settle down period – at least 24 hours in a small safe place with some overhead protection
- Check physical condition, if sterilized or intact
- **Feral or frantic** - Determine the level of domestication
 - Check for tipped ear identification
 - Truly feral cats** will not accept *any* touching
 - Will instantly take on a “battle” look
 - Will lash out at *all* objects
 - Will show no response to “household sounds” (can of cat food opening)
 - Will be **intact** (unless ear tipped) and show other physical clues
 - If female - will be pregnant, nursing or in heat
 - If male – large head, jowls, thin body, battle scars, spiky coat
 - Rough paw pads, thick coat in cold climate
- Check responsiveness – offer “pleasure”; give the cat short **stimulus exposure** sessions
- Use non threatening “teasers” – feathers work best
- Watch for subtle signs of previous socialization – eye blink, tail up, head arch
- All change is stressful; **any** progress is promising
- Don’t combine physical veterinary exam with assessment of social level

Aggression – determine if defensive or offensive

The signs:

- Visual posturing –
 - Defensive - fear/submissive signs** such as crouching, or attacking only when cornered or threatened
 - Offensive/hostile** - lashing out at every attempt, biting
- Coat changes – bushed-up is a serious danger sign of pending aggression; tail ridge
- Eyes, ears, head – dilated pupils, ear set back and flat, head tilt (offensive)
- Vocalization – hiss/spit, low growl (defensive); yowl, screech, snarl (offensive)

The triggers:

- Territorial Sight or smell of another cat – desire to attack
 - Fear based Cautious nature of the cat – terrorized reaction to a threat, no escape
 - Redirected Sight, sound or smell of another cat – suddenly may turn on *any* cat or human; extreme anger, stalking behavior can signal impending attack
 - Over-stimulation Petting – males especially; belly sensitive; back near tail sensitivity (bite reflex)
 - Play based Progressive – suddenly gets out of control; biting hands, ankles
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Handling techniques to enhance positive behavior in social (non-feral cats)

The smallest cat/kitten can greatly intimidate with a hissing and spiting display. When handling cats in an unfamiliar environment special techniques can encourage positive responses.

Aggressive reactions in frightened but social cats are usually **defensive**.

General tips:

- **Direct eye contact** (by a stranger) is considered confrontational by the cat.
- **Cats do not like to be restrained** – use minimum force and hand contact until the cat begins to be at ease. Cuddling (by a stranger) is considered restraint by the cat.
- **Clean surfaces and hands with disinfectant with added odor neutralizer** (avoids smell of other cats and disarms the cat ability to discern danger)
- **Use distractions** to divert the cat's attention
 - Smell and taste – baby food (Gerbers)
 - Sight and sound – use teasers (feathers, rattle, movement)

Handling steps

(for social but “frantic” cats , not familiar with the handler and not in a home territory)

- **Approach with confidence** – do **NOT** offer a hand to smell as with a pet cat in a home.
 - Avoid plastic “Assess-a-hand” tool or large gloves
- **Use distractions** to move hind quarters to the front of the holding cage
- **Remove the cat hind quarters first** using hand grasp of front legs and torso support; put the cat on a table surface facing away from the handler and toward open space (don't drag out head first)
- **Use minimal hand control** - firm only if necessary; no force or neck scruff hold
- **Touch with gentle strokes** – finger brush on side of mouth to allow the cat to sense the handler; side of head and neck, shoulder area, sides to tail, circular massage, gradual;
- **Avoid** – direct eye contact; vision of **another cat**; over stimulation; back area at tail base, belly, hugging, clutching or face too close

Adversity exposure - helps build confidence in the cat;

- **To enhance social response** handling sessions should be short, pleasant and repeated
- **Food treats, teasers, toys** will be remembered.
- **No biting, scratching or lashing out allowed** – make a “hurt” noise and end the play/petting session if the cat lashes out or scratches.
- **Reward** for gentleness; help the cat to gradually realize that handling/stroking is something not threatening, but instead pleasurable.
- **Be careful of catnip** since it can be too stimulating for some cats and cause unpredictable aggressive reactions in intact cats under stress.
- **Be careful of other cat smells on clothes**; use disinfectant/odor control, avoid perfumes as some cats react negatively.
- **If the cat shows signs of fearfulness** don't reinforce by babying giving the “poor thing” message. Cats will cautiously test and based on your reaction they assume there really is danger/something to be afraid of. The cat concludes he is being praised for his ability to sense danger.

Let the cat gain confidence on his own - repetitive exposure to potentially uncomfortable situations that actually pose no threat builds ego.

As the cat begins to cope his confidence grows and fears diminish. Putting a cat in a busy, bustling area where he can **observe but feel safe** can help the adaptation to strange surroundings. Introduce background noise, music, quiet cleaning activity, people coming and going without confronting the cat directly.

Keep a progress chart or notes – even if the cat shows signs of fear and is hiding ANY progress is an indication that eventually there will be success.

Cats appreciate looking nice.

Most cats will learn to welcome grooming – combing and especially “wet-hand” grooming. A “mouse” waterless shampoo greatly improves the appearance of the coat in 5 minutes. Wiping eyes and ears, clipping claws is all part of routine care and will be accepted by almost all cats.

The basic nature of cats is related to their superb survival characteristics

The cat

Cats are **observers** – **choice** is important
Prefer to watch from above. Cage at eye level.

Cats are **cautious** – programmed to be careful,
Prefer hiding to attack; defensive aggression when cornered. Fear reaction to anything “new”.

Cats are **sensitive** – they rely on smell for recognition even more than sight. Anything coming down from above causes apprehension. Strange loud sounds cause stress.

Cats are **predators** – programmed for specific hunting skills; need opportunity to show off.

Cats are **easy reproducers** – most communication (spraying, scratching, rubbing, vocalization) roaming and occasional aggressive tendencies stem from basic reproductive drives even after the cat is sterilized.

The human reaction

Give up control, be an equal, **redirect**, communicate, **Compromise**. Let cats observe the “new” first.

Patience – be there but leave the cat alone, avoid confrontational actions (from the cat’s viewpoint). Use **distractions, stimulus exposure**. Establish **routine** until new desired habits evolve.

Introduce cats to each other by allowing them to first be aware of each others’ **smell**. Avoid harsh noises. Mixed background sounds are well tolerated. Water, music, hustle/bustle to arouse curiosity.

Avoid “kittenhood” hunting habits if possible. **Substitute** toys, play “hunt”, **mental stimulation**

Sterilization alleviates most problems. Be sensitive to **territory encroachment**. Provide a safe “home base” (food source/social focus). Know when to limit handling

All cats should be valued no matter what their level of domestication or temperament. Independent/not-so-social cats can be admired for what they are, for their resourcefulness and natural “wild” character.