

Boroughbred Behavior Resources



Issue: Socializing an Adult Cat

Some cats may be less social than others for many reasons. Some may be naturally shy in disposition, they may not have had exposure to people from an early age, they may have been separated from their mother and/or littermates too soon, or they may have experienced frightening events related to people in the past.

If you are reading this, it means you've adopted a cat that needs help learning to trust people and we sincerely thank you (from the bottom of our hearts) for sharing your home with a cat that really needs it. Your new cat will need to learn social skills with humans and your time and patience will be key components to help them succeed in their new home. Here are some tips on how to help an older cat get more comfortable around people.

Start in a Small Room

When you're bringing your new cat home, allow them to adjust in a small room. Larger spaces can be overwhelming for a shy or nervous cat, a small area will be much easier for them to get used to. In this space, provide all of their essentials like food and water, toys, a scratching post, a bed, and a litter box. Your cat will want to hide, so it's important you provide them with hiding spots and/or high spaces to perch so they feel more secure. High spaces allows your cat to observe their surroundings at a safe distance without withdrawing, and this will help build confidence.

Set Time to Hang Out

Hanging out with your cat without interacting will help your cat get used to you. These visits should be Zen-like; you want to stay as quiet as possible and avoid making sudden movements or noises to avoid startling them. Give them the chance to come out of hiding on their own if they want to explore, but don't take them out of hiding or force interactions because you don't want to create a fear response. Try not to expect too much out of your cat too soon. Our objective is to earn your cat's trust in this space before allowing them to explore the rest of your home.

Use their Favorite Food or Treats

A great way to form a positive bond with your cat is with food. Most cats really enjoy canned tuna, meat flavored baby food, or "squeeze ups", so try to figure out what your cat loves. Your goal is to find something they can't resist and offer them some whenever you're around. Place the food near the opening of their hiding spot (or wherever they're perched), just enough so they have visual sight of you and can eat comfortably. If they're too nervous to eat in front of you, try distancing yourself a bit, turn away and avoid staring, or read a book until they feel relaxed enough to eat. Continue to do this as many times as you can each day until your cat gets used to the routine and their body posture becomes more relaxed. If they appear more comfortable, you may gradually place the food bowl further away from their hiding spot (or closer to you) to encourage them to come out of hiding and show them that nothing scary will happen when they do. It's important to remember to refrain from petting until they're ready to interact.

Side note – If your cat does not finish their food, take the rest of the food with you when you leave. You want to teach them that they only get the super delicious food whenever their human is around, which will ultimately help them form a positive association with you!

Use Pheromones

Feliway is a synthetic calming pheromone that can help reduce stress and can help a nervous cat feel better about interacting. It mimics the scent mother cats emit to help soothe her kittens. They are usually undetectable by humans and you can purchase them as plug-ins or in spray form, but be sure to never spray any scents directly onto your cat.

Play Therapy

Every cat is a hunter at heart, and playing allows them to practice skills needed in order to survive in the wild. When your cat is able to successfully hunt and kill (a toy in this case), it can increase your cat's confidence in their environment and may help them interact with people more easily. Wand toys are great interactive toys that will allow you to play with your cat at a distance, in case they're still too nervous to come near you. Just remember to start off slow and gentle at first to avoid scaring them. You can move the toy near your cat to pique their interest, and then mimic prey-like movements to encourage them to pounce and allow their hunter instincts take over.

Tempted to Touch

When your cat appears to be more relaxed in your presence and is willing to come near you to sniff and investigate, you've already made great progress! Before diving in for pets, slowly reach out and extend a finger for your cat to sniff. They'll probably come closer to you or rub their head against your finger if they're interested in interacting. If they initiate touch, you can slowly try to pet them gently on the head and cheeks, and slowly work your way towards their body. Make sure you reward them with treats each step of the way so you're giving them incentive to interact with you! If they lean away or seem uncomfortable, just let them be.

Introduce other Human Friends

Once you've finally earned your cat's trust and are able to interact with them, even if it's limited, you can start to introduce them to other people. Invite a fellow cat-lover over to meet your cat. Let them know that your cat is on the timid side and the reason you're inviting them over is so your cat can get used to other people. Be sure this person understands they will need to be calm and gentle when hanging out. Have a bag of your cat's favorite treats ready and instruct them to ignore the kitty until they display behavior you want to see more of (for example: coming out of hiding, coming forward to sniff, or even making eye contact). Have your friend reward your cat with treats whenever your cat does something brave! If your cat continues to keep a distance but is showing interest and watching your friend, your friend can periodically toss your cat treats to help them associate people with positive things. Remember, don't force interactions and give your cat the option to interact on their own.

If you're having company over and your cat isn't comfortable with them yet, you can set up a designated sanctuary space your cat can retreat to. This space should have all of their necessities. Let your guests know that this area is off limits so your feline friend has a place to rest comfortably.

Managing Expectations

Each cat is an individual and the length of time it takes for them to warm up to their humans will vary. It may take weeks, or even months, for a cat to get adjusted to one person. Don't try to speed up the process by picking them up or bringing them closer to you because you may end up convincing them they need to distance themselves even more. Your cat should always have the option to socialize or not. Your cat may only learn to trust a few select people, and that's okay! The most important thing is whether or not your cat feels comfortable with YOU and the people living with you.

Please see related flyers: "Decompression Period" and "Helping a Fearful Cat"

Resources:

<https://www.catbehaviorassociates.com/how-do-i-get-a-cat-to-like-me/>

For more information:

International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants: <https://m.iaabc.org/>

Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists: <http://corecaab.org/>