

Boroughbred Behavior Resources



Issue: Cat Hugs! (Picking up and Holding Your Cat)

- Although hugs and embraces are an accepted and valued form of displaying human affection, other animals such as cats may have less of a natural inclination towards enjoying bonding in this way. A cat may feel restrained and trapped when hugged or held and in order to feel confident and safe a cat always needs to have the option to retreat and to solicit attention on their own terms. Although being picked up may be unnatural for a cat, all hope is not lost when it comes to teaching a cat to be more tolerant of this form of interaction, as long as they're approached by someone with a little bit of cat behavior knowledge and patience.
- Always begin a pick-up attempt with a relaxed and comfortable cat. Let your cat come to you and begin with long strokes along their head and body. See how tolerant your cat is of touch – do they remain calm when pet all the way down to their tail or do they turn to watch your hand and sway their tail sway back and forth? For every good permissive response you see, reward your cat with a treat to begin to build a positive association with touch. Reward for each head-bonk, when they lean in, and with each stroke along the back. Depending on how sensitive your cat is towards touch, this step may need to be repeated daily until enough positive association has been established.
- Begin to place your hand on one side of your cat during petting sessions. If they are tolerant of that, apply gentle pressure and let go – then reward with a treat. Work up to placing your hands on both sides of the cat at the same time (always while rewarding with treats) – then work up to applying gentle pressure on both sides and letting go. Be sure your cat is comfortable with this amount of touch and handling before practicing the next and final few steps.
- Always be sure to approach a cat that is relaxed when attempting to pick up. Do not try to pick up a cat if they are scared, tense, or trying to get away. Soft body language means it is safe to attempt lifting them up and if you have been following the previous steps, your cat should be getting more and more tolerant of different forms of petting and touch. Do not attempt picking up a cat by sneaking up behind them or by approaching them directly from the front. A pick up attempt with you standing directly in front of a cat may make them feel threatened, while an attempt from behind may be startling.
- Approach your cat from the side and be sure that they can see you. Always use both hands – one to support the rear end of their body and one to support the front, under the cat's chest area and behind their front legs. When a cat is lifted they may want to rest their arms on yours while you cradle and support their rear. When lifting a cat from a high surface you can use one arm to support the bottom half and keep one hand gently on the back of their neck so you have more control over their head. Be sure that you are always in your cat's line of sight.

- Don't pick up a cat and cradle her like a baby unless your cat is comfortable and tolerates touch all over. Most cats feel too vulnerable when their belly is exposed and you are exposing yourself to all of their weapons – all paws and claws are facing up towards you! Most cats feel comfortable when held right side up.
- Never drop or release a cat when you are done carrying them. Gently placing your cat down onto the floor and making sure they have the ground under their legs for support before releasing helps create and establish trust. Your cat needs to feel secure and safe from beginning to end in order for them to build the proper positive associations.
- Is your cat super chunky? Overweight cats typically don't feel comfortable with pick up because they don't always feel as if their weight is being supported and may feel like they're falling. Follow up all of the steps above to make sure your chubby kitty feels supported and comfortable at all times. If they continue to struggle during pick up, consider refraining from this type of handling to ensure your cat can be their happiest self.

Things to remember:

- Always reward with treats!
- No one wants to be touched all the time, so if your cat lets you know they don't really want to hug right now, it doesn't mean they'll always feel that way. Play a game, give a treat, or let them chill for now and try again later.
- Take lots of breaks and keep the training fun!

Although cats may not enjoy being held and lifted, following these steps will help you get from point A to point B. With these proper tools and techniques, you can help teach your cat that these types of interactions are not threatening and may even be enjoyable!

Resources:

<https://www.catbehaviorassociates.com/the-proper-way-to-pick-up-and-hold-a-cat/2/>

<https://www.embracepetinsurance.com/waterbowl/article/teach-your-cat-to-enjoy-being-held>

For more information:

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

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