

Adopting a Very Shy or Feral Cat

What is a Very Shy or Feral Cat?

A shy cat is a cat that is extremely shy with people and that may have had little to no past human contact, or have been a stray for a very long time. Sometimes very shy cats are called feral cats, meaning they are undomesticated and not used to living with people. The term 'feral' does not mean these cats are aggressive. On the contrary, feral cats tend to be timid and afraid of people, typically doing their utmost to avoid human contact. However, shy cats are generally comfortable living with other cats.

Realistic Expectations When Adopting a Very Shy or Feral Cat

- Shy cats will likely stay somewhat shy and will take anywhere from several months to years to learn to live with humans and feel comfortable in your home.
- Shy cats will often initially regress and become temporarily shyer upon moving into a new home.
- They prefer small areas and hidey holes to feel safe.
- They don't like new people, fast movements, loud noises, door bells and the like.
- Shy cats may never feel comfortable with visitors to your home, preferring to retreat when strangers arrive.
- They may bond with the whole family or may prefer a close relationship with only one or two family members.
- Feral cats are quiet, keen observers who love a predictable routine and calm environment.
- They have a boundless curiosity and are often extremely playful.
- Shy or feral cats usually love living with other cats and can often form close relationships with dogs.
- The best way to understand a shy or feral cat is to imagine yourself in their shoes (or paws, as the case may be). As a shy cat living in a family home, you're completely surrounded by an alien species. It would take you a very long time to learn to live in this new environment without your old companions.

General Tips to Help a Shy Cat Transition into Your Home

- Prepare a safe starter room or sanctuary for your new cat. This will provide the cat with the quiet and safety s/he needs while becoming familiar with the scents and sounds of your home. The starter room can be any size but must have a secure door and ceiling.
- Cat-proof the safe room. Check out our *Cat Health and Safety* resource sheet for more information.
- Keep in mind that shy cats are nervous and like to hide. Cardboard boxes or sheets draped over a couple chairs make ideal hiding spots when you first bring your new cat home.
- Remove large items of furniture from the safe room, such as beds and dressers. It is much easier to interact with a cat hiding in a box than a cat hiding under a bed.
- Equip the safe room with cat food, water and litter. Place food and water on one side of the room and an open (unenclosed) litter box on the other side.
- Shy cats may not eat much for the first 24 to 48 hours and may have temporary diarrhea from stress. If your cat has not eaten in 48 hours, try extra tasty treats such as canned tuna or salmon. If this is not successful, you may want to consult your Adoption Specialist for advice.

How to Begin Interacting with a Shy Cat

Quality time with people is very important. Start out with:

- Very slow movements
- Quiet voices
- Eye contact with lots of blinking, as this reassures the cat of your friendly intent
- Yawning and slowly looking away to show you are not a threat
- Establishing a predictable routine

Next, you'll want to help the cat get used to normal activities in your home. To do this, try the following:

- Read a book or magazine out loud or talk on the phone to friends so the cat gets used to your voice.
- Play a radio quietly—soft classical music is often best—and only for an hour or two each day. Loud and constant radio noise can actually add more stress.
- Sit or lay on the floor when talking to your new kitty. This posture is much less threatening than standing above them.
- Show the cat anything new you bring into the room, whether a book, telephone or glass of water. Cats are very curious and want to know that the new object is not a threat.
- Upon each visit, offer the cat one small tasty treat. This way, they begin to associate your visit with something pleasant. You can use a long-handled spoon or stick to offer the treat. (Remember: You don't want to over indulge the cat with treats as this can lead to obesity. It is intended just to be a small reward.)

How to Pet a Shy Cat

- Start by using a wand toy, long feather such as a peacock feather, or petting stick.
- First, set your petting stick, feather or wand on the floor so the cat can see and sniff it.
- Start to touch the cat ever so gently and lightly around the cheeks and chin for only a very short time such as 30-60 seconds in the early days. Then, set the petting stick down for several minutes and talk to the cat. Repeat a few times each day.
- As the cat gets used to the touch of the petting stick and begins to indicate this is a pleasurable experience (your cat may lift its head so you can stroke its chin or rub against the wand on its own), you can begin to slowly introduce the touch of the petting stick to the top of the head, the back and other areas of the body.
- Go slowly and build on each day's success gradually. Over time, you may be able to slowly move your hand down the length of the petting stick until you fingers are helping the wand pet the cat.
- The goal is to be able to introduce your hand and fingers as the 'substitute' petting stick once the cat identifies the wand as a very pleasant experience.

Integration from the Safe Room into the Rest of the Home

When you and your new cat have established a trusting relationship, the cat is ready to begin exploring your home. Be sure to begin this process when you are home to supervise.

- Close most of the doors so the cat begins its orientation in stages. Too many new spaces at once will be stressful and frightening.
- Do not let a shy cat into the basement for many weeks or they may hide in the rafters or other small, dark places where you'll be unable to work on socialization.
- Full house privileges may take 2-3 months depending on the personality of the cat.

Very Shy or Feral Cat/Kitten Companions for the Resident Cat

Very shy or feral cats are often used to other cats and welcome feline companionship. They will be very lonely on their own, so we recommend that the integration process take place very quickly (1-3 days) unless there are significant problems. If you encounter problems, follow the 5 phases outlined on the MEOW resource sheet *Integration with Cats, Dogs and Kids* or call your Adoption Specialist for advice.