Starting on the Right Paw: First Days with a New Cat

Welcome Home

Even the most confident cats and kittens can be stressed by moving to a new home. Change is notoriously difficult for cats but new owners can ease the transition.

Start in a Safe Zone

When you first bring your new cat home, start them in a small space like a bedroom or bathroom. Cats are very sensitive to their territory and can become very scared if dropped into an unknown space. Unless you have a very small home, your cat will adjust more quickly in a smaller space than if they are faced with the whole house. A smaller space also lets you keep track of where the cat is if they hide initially. **Hiding is normal** for cats in a new space but it is still important to monitor where the cat is and make sure they are safe.

Choose a safe zone that is large enough to fit everything your new cat will need including a large litter box, a raised perch, and a comfortable hiding place (your cat carrier can work for this). The space should allow food and water to be separated from the litter box and also have natural light.

Don't Overwhelm Them

A new cat is exciting and no doubt everyone in the family will want to play with them right away. Be patient with new cats who aren't sure about the new living arrangement. During the first few days, keep interactions low key and at the cat's pace. Resist inviting lots of friends over to meet the new addition. If the space is very small, limit it to one person at a time so your cat has space to move away if they want to.

If your new cat seems shy or fearful, this is the time to take it slow. Don't rush to pet or pick them up. Being respectful of their boundaries will show them that they can trust you whereas forcing them to interact will delay that trust. Sit with them, talk quietly, offer treats and toys, and your patience will be rewarded.

Time to Cat-Proof

You may have already done some “cat-proofing” around your home before you brought your new cat or kitten home. But while your new companion is in their safe zone, it’s a great time to check for dangers or areas of potential destruction.

Stuff That Can Make Them Sick

Could your house plants be dangerous? Now is the time to check the ASPCA’s list of toxic vs non-toxic plants.

Cats often stick their noses where they don’t belong. Make sure that “curiosity” doesn’t “kill the cat” by putting away cleaning supplies, medications, and personal products (including cosmetics) that a cat may lick or eat. Remember that cats end up consuming what is on their fur when they groom. If they walk through household chemicals or products, they can get sick from them.

Stuff That They Can Get Tangled In

Cord management is important with cats around. Some cats will chew on cords in general; others end up trying to chew their way out if they get tangled in cords behind a desk. It may seem unlikely (your cat can’t be that dumb!) but happens frequently to young cats chasing toys or playing. Tuck cords away neatly, cover them with cord protectors, and spray with anti-chew spray to prevent problems.

Stuff To Knock Over

It’s such a fun game – pushing things off of shelves! For the most part, knocking books and valuables out of place isn’t dangerous for your cat. But it is really annoying. Combat this activity by pushing books to the back of shelves to eliminate the space for a cat behind them. Use museum wax to stick small items to the shelf. Most cats won’t keep trying if an object doesn’t move easily.

Ready for the Big Time

When is your cat ready for their introduction to the whole house? When they are relaxed and acting “normal” in their safe zone. Make sure they get a few days of using the litter box, eating, and socializing with you while in the space so they can transition from whatever life they were leading before coming to you. For a shy cat, you may not get to the point that they are fully comfortable coming right out to greet you for petting. But you do want to give them time to start showing relaxed behaviors even if it takes a while. They should be spending time out of their hiding spot and demonstrating willingness to interact, even if it’s still cautious.

A Little at a Time

When you first open the door to the rest of the house, start with access to a portion of the house at a time. Close doors to other bedrooms, bathrooms, stairways, etc. if possible. The goal is to let your cat get a feel for the house a little bit at a time. This helps keep it from being overwhelming and also makes sure your cat can easily find their way back to the litter box when necessary.

Save the Safe Zone

Your cat should have access to their safe zone whenever they want. This lets them return to a known territory and regain their feeling of security if needed. Some cats will make use of this more than others but all will benefit from having the option. As your cat slowly gains confidence in the rest of the house, you can start moving some of their familiar furniture into other spaces to help build the sense of territory throughout the house. But make sure the space continues to represent everything your cat needs.

In the future, your cat's safe zone will be a place for them to stay if you need them out of the way. Need to give a fearful cat a break from guests or an energetic cat away from workers? Now you have it.

House Rules and Expectations

Every cat is different in how quickly they adjust to their new home and how quickly they can be trusted not to get into trouble. Some cats can gradually be introduced to the house over the course of a weekend and have no issues. Shy and fearful cats will do better with a much longer, slower transition to gain confidence. Young cats and kittens may need to mature a bit before they are fully trustworthy. It is better to expand freedom slowly so they don't make mistakes, rather than having to correct bad habits later.

Kittens in particular may have trouble finding their litter box in a large home. Giving them boxes in multiple places and restricting them to fewer rooms will help make sure they develop good habits.