

Interacting With Your Shy Kitten

How soon you'll be able to cuddle with your newly adopted, shy kitten will vary depending on the kitten's age, temperament, and genetic makeup. Older, very shy kittens will need more time than younger shy kittens. Patience is the key ingredient.

The following recommendations are designed to help your kitten adjust to her new environment, as well as form an everlasting bond between you and your family. Progress through each step slowly. Do not proceed to the next step if your kitten appears fearful (ears pressed back and flat against her head, pupils dilated, cowering, hissing, or growling).

1. The first day you bring your kitten home, put her in a quiet room with a litter box on one side of the room and dry cat food and water on the other side. Place a cat carrier, dog crate, or cardboard box in the room so the kitten has a place to hide. The room should have a door so the kitten doesn't run out. For a kitten 4 months and under, house her in a large dog carrier or cat playpen, with a litter box, bedding, water, and scratching pad. Small kittens can crawl into small spaces and are very difficult to find and coax out. Never attempt to pull a kitten out from a hiding place. This may increase her fearfulness and can result in you being bitten or scratched. Check on the kitten several more times that day to feed her and clean her litter box if necessary. Leave a TV or radio on for the kitten. Talk to her softly when you enter the room so that she becomes familiar with your voice. Do not try to pet her yet.
2. For the next several days, spend time in the room with the kitten, reading aloud, conducting a low-key activity, or trying to engage the kitten in play (using a toy such as a Cat Dancer® or Cat Teaser®). Use subtle movements when playing with the toy so as not to scare her. Place a bit of canned (wet) food, or brothy baby food (chicken, turkey, or beef flavored) near her when you first enter the room. Remove the food bowl when you leave. She'll soon learn that your presence signals something very special to eat. Place some food treats near where you're sitting, or put a bit of food on your finger, to try to entice her to approach you. If she approaches, allow her to lick the food off your finger. **Resist** the urge to reach out to pet or pick her up. This will scare her, which will only cause her to run and hide.
3. Once she begins eating in your presence, gradually move the food bowl near to where you're sitting (whether it be on the floor or in a chair). Continue to move the bowl closer and closer to you. When the kitten is comfortable eating near you, put the bowl down and place your hand near the side of the bowl. If she eats with your hand near the bowl, next time put the bowl down and leave one hand touching the side of the bowl. When she can eat with your hand touching the bowl, try stroking her lightly on the side of her cheek or under her chin with the hand that was touching the bowl. Most cats are more comfortable being touched around the face than on other parts of the body, however some are more tolerant of petting around the sides of their body and along their back. The key is to approach very slowly and from the level of the kitten's paws (not from overhead). If she recoils or runs away, let her. Allow her to return to you when she's ready. The last step is to begin petting her under her belly, which is a very sensitive area for most cats. Start to lift her slightly off the ground, gradually lifting her higher and higher. The proper way to handle a kitten or cat is to place one hand around the chest and front legs and the other

under the hindquarters. If she starts squirming, or if she shows signs of fear (ears pressed flat and back against her head, pupils dilated, hissing, growling) put her down gently. She's not ready to be picked up yet. If she doesn't squirm, hold her to your chest and begin petting her gently. Purring is a good indication that she's enjoying your company.

4. Finally, expose your kitten to a variety of people so that she learns to accept strangers. Go slowly and use food treats (e.g. baby food). Have them feed her baby food from their finger. This will help her gain trust in them (just as she did with you!). Monitor her comfort level. By now you know your kitten better than anyone.

Remember that kittens can be very playful, so consider adopting two instead of one. Adopting littermates is ideal!

Barbara Pezzanite, Ph.D., CPDT-KA
Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist