



Fearful Feline Training Guide

Name _____

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Microchip # _____

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Fearful Felines – Understanding and Supporting Them

WHAT ARE THEY?

Fearful cats are individuals who show caution, avoidance, or defensive behaviors, in response to unfamiliar people, environments, or experiences. Their fear may appear as hiding, freezing, hissing, swatting, or fleeing. These cats are not “mean” or “unfriendly”—they are simply unsure and need time and trust to feel safe.

Fearful behavior can range from mild shyness to severe avoidance like we see with feral cats. Some cats recover confidence quickly, while others may need weeks or months of consistent support before showing comfort.

WHY ARE THEY LIKE THIS?

Fearfulness in cats often develops due to a mix of genetics, early experiences, and environment. Common contributing factors include *limited socialization* to people during the critical socialization window of 2-7 weeks of age, *stressful or traumatic experiences* like rough handling, loud environments or negative interactions, *frequent changes in routine*, surroundings or people, *sensitive temperament* some cats are naturally more cautious and take longer to adapt. It's important to remember that fear-based behaviors are a coping strategy, not a sign of aggression or poor temperament.

HOW TO SUPPORT THEM

Fearful cats can thrive when given time, space, and positive experiences. With gentle handling and consistent support, many blossom into affectionate, trusting companions. The goal is not to “fix” fear overnight, but to help the cat feel safe enough to be themselves.

- 1. Give choice and control-** Let the cat decide when to approach and avoid forcing interactions. Make yourself predictable calm and safe.
- 2. Create a secure environment-** Provide hiding spaces, high perches, and cozy bedding. Keep noise levels low and limit new people or animals until the cat settles in.
- 3. Predictable calm routines-** Feed, clean, and interact at predictable times and move slowly and speak softly around the cat. When approaching, approach with your body sideways as opposed to head on.
- 4. Pair your presence with good things-** Offer treats or play from a comfortable distance for the cat. This lets the cat associate you with positive, low-pressure experiences.
- 5. Respect communication-** Learn to read cat body language- flattened ears, dilated pupils or a tucked tail mean the cat is scared. Step back and give space when they show stress signals to build trust over time.

Fearful Felines – Understanding and Supporting Them (Cont.)

TRAINING TIPS

Training can help fearful cats build confidence and form positive associations with people and their surroundings. Use reward-based, fear-free methods only. Focus on small wins—like the cat coming out of hiding, sniffing your hand, or staying relaxed in the same room. Celebrate progress, however small it seems.

1. **Clicker or marker training-** Mark calm or curious behavior and reward with a treat.
2. **Desensitization-** Gradually introduce new people, handling, or sounds at a pace the cat can handle.
3. **Target training-** Teach the cat to touch a stick or your hand with their nose- this helps to build agency and cooperation.
4. **Enrichment play-** Wand toys, food puzzles, and scent-based games reduce anxiety and boost confidence.

Confinement and Slow Transition

WHAT IS IT?

Confinement and slow transition is a method of helping cats adjust comfortably to a new environment. It involves starting them in a small, secure area before gradually giving them access to more space as they gain confidence.

A *confinement space* might be a quiet room, bathroom, or large kennel set up with all the essentials: litterbox, food, water, bed, toys, scratching post and hide box. If using a large kennel, set up in a low traffic, calm area where the cat can feel safe, observe, and begin to relax.

The *slow transition* happens once the cat shows comfort—eating, using the litter box, exploring, and showing curiosity. Only then should they be introduced to new rooms or other animals.

WHY USE IT?

Confinement and gradual transition are essential tools for reducing stress and building trust in cats, particularly those who are fearful, shy, or newly arrived in a new environment. Starting a cat in a smaller, quiet space helps prevent overwhelm by giving them a sense of safety and control.

This controlled introduction allows them to adjust gradually, build confidence at their own pace, and develop positive associations with their surroundings and caregivers. Confinement also supports consistent litter box use and makes it easier to observe eating, grooming, and comfort levels—important indicators of wellbeing. By expanding their world slowly, caregivers can create safer social introductions, minimize fear-based reactions, and set the cat up for long-term success and emotional stability.

HOW TO SET IT UP

1. **Choose the right space-** Select a quiet, low-traffic area like a spare bedroom, office, or bathroom. Avoid open or busy spaces at first.
2. **Add essentials-** Food and water dishes, cozy bed, or blanket, hiding options (cat cave, box, carrier), litter box (away from food/water), scratching post, toys and enrichment items.
3. **Create comfort and routine-** keep lighting soft and avoid loud noises, visit calmly at predictable times for feeding and gentle interaction. Use soft voices and slow movements to build trust.
4. **Expand Gradually-** Wait until the cat is consistently eating, grooming, and greeting you comfortably before opening new areas. Introduce one new space at a time, allowing retreat to their “safe space” if needed.

Confinement and Slow Transition (Cont.)

TRAINING TIPS

- **Use scent to build familiarity-** Rub a cloth on furniture or other pets and place it near the cat's area before introductions.
- **Let the cat lead-** Progress only when the cat shows curiosity.
- **Reward exploration-** Offer treats or play when the cat ventures out or interacts calmly.
- **Maintain consistency-** Predictable routines help cats feel safe and in control.
- **Avoid chasing or forcing interaction-** This can set back trust and increase fear.
- **Be patient-** Adjustment can take days or weeks- slow progress builds lasting confidence.

Enrichment for Cats

WHAT IS IT?

Enrichment means creating a home environment that is fun, intriguing, and engaging while also supporting their natural instincts. This can be accomplished with simple adjustments to your living space that give your cat opportunities to explore, climb, jump, hide, scratch, and perch up high to observe their surroundings. Providing a variety of activities, including options that keep them entertained when they are alone, helps prevent boredom and encourages a happy, healthy, and well-adjusted cat.

WHY DO IT?

Enriching your cat's space is essential because cats and kittens of all ages need both mental and physical stimulation to thrive. A thoughtfully enriched environment can help prevent boredom, reduce destructive scratching, and minimize excessive or nighttime vocalizations. It also eases stress and fear during changes in routine or environment and provides healthy outlets for playful aggression or overstimulation in energetic cats. In multi-cat households, enrichment can reduce tension and encourage positive interactions. For cats who are eager to explore outdoors, a rich and engaging indoor environment offers safe alternatives that satisfy their natural instincts and curiosity.

HOW TO ENRICH

1. **Vertical Spaces:** Cats naturally seek out high places because climbing, perching, and surveying from above gives them a sense of safety and control over their surroundings. Provide ample spots like shelves, cat trees, and window perches.
2. **Safe Spaces:** Cats need places to withdraw from home activity and relax uninterrupted. Offer both low and high covered locations to nestle.
3. **Explorative Spaces:** Tunnels, boxes, and even paper bags can all be fun, novel places for cats to explore. Sprinkle some catnip in them for a little added spunk!
4. **Scratching Posts:** All cats need appropriate surfaces for scratching, as it helps them maintain healthy claws, stretch their muscles, and leave their scent. To meet this need, offer a variety of scratching options in different textures—like cardboard, sisal rope, or carpet—and in different layouts, such as vertical posts, horizontal pads, or wall-mounted scratchers. This variety keeps scratching enriching and ensures your cat always has an appealing alternative to furniture.
5. **Interactive and Automated Toys:** Try out battery operated cat toys or a motion-sensor toys that provide opportunities for play even when you are away.
6. **Interactive Feeders and Puzzle Toys:** Instead of free feeding, try out a puzzle toy or feeder that makes kitty work for their food!
7. **Audio/Visual Feast:** TV or music left on can provide visual and auditory enrichment (apps, YouTube channels, and music exist specifically for cats!).

Enrichment for Cats (Cont.)

8. **Safe Outdoor Exposure:** Catio, secured outdoor enclosures, harness training, backpack carrier training, and bird feeders seen through a window can all be ways of letting your cat enjoy the sights and sounds of the outdoors without the major risks.
9. **Training:** Reward-based training helps shy, fearful cats by creating predictable, positive experiences that build confidence and a sense of control. It encourages choice without pressure, reduces fear, and helps cats feel safer in their environment.

TRAINING TIPS

1. **Share the love:** In a multi-cat home, make sure there are enough resources and enrichment listed above for every animal to reap the benefits. For example, one high spot is not enough for three cats to share.
2. **Mix It up:** Cats can get bored with the same toy, same tunnel, same treat so be sure to rotate a couple of things in and out of their routine every few days.
3. **Make time:** An engaging environment is a lovely way to enrich the lives of your feline companions, but don't forget it is only part of a healthy routine. All cats still benefit from daily interactive play sessions and cuddle time with their people, so move that wand toy around for them and give them plenty of attention to provide a well-balanced life!

For more enrichment ideas:

- *Catification: Designing a Happy and Stylish Home for Your Cat (and You!)* by Jackson Galaxy and Kate Benjamin
- *Indoor Cat: How to Enrich Their Lives and Expand Their World* by Laura J. Moss and Lynn Bahr

Positive Reinforcement vs. Aversive Punishment

WHAT IS POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT?

Positive reinforcement involves rewarding your cats for behavior you'd like them to repeat. Rewards can come in many forms, including play, petting, food, and treats. The most important thing is that your cat enjoys it!

WHAT IS AVERSIVE PUNISHMENT?

Aversive punishment means adding something painful, frightening, or unpleasant with the goal of stopping behavior. Examples include startling noises (like clapping, shaking a can of pennies, using compressed air, blowing, or hissing at the cat), physical corrections (such as scruffing, pushing, swatting, hitting, or spraying with water).

WHY NOT CORRECT UNWANTED BEHAVIOR?

Cats are sensitive animals, and punishment can easily damage their trust. While corrections may interrupt an unwanted behavior in the moment, they do not teach the cat what to do instead. Punishment also fails to increase a cat's motivation or desire to perform preferred behaviors. As a result, many cats resume the behavior once the correction ends, while also learning to avoid—or even fear—the person delivering the punishment.

HOW TO TRAIN POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

1. Using a treat or toy, lure your cat from one place to another or into a desired position.
2. Give your cat plenty of daily mental and physical exercise. A tired cat is a good cat!
3. Prevent unwanted behaviors using environmental management.
 - a. Use gates, or visual barriers so that your cat can't practice the unwanted behaviors.
4. Teach your cat new behaviors to replace the unwanted ones.
5. For more information, see the handout titled "Teaching Alternative Behaviors".
6. Ignore unwanted behaviors when they occur and calmly direct your cat toward a more desirable behavior.

Polite Greeting

WHAT IS IT?

A *polite greeting* is when we extend a low pressure greeting to a cat by offering them our index finger to sniff.

WHY TEACH IT?

A polite greeting is a form of a nose target behavior. We can use this behavior in many ways: to guide our cats focus of where to look, get a cat to move from one spot to another, or teach new fun tricks, but our main use for the polite greeting is to say “hello” and allow the cat to gather information about us through the scent on our finger. In short, a polite greeting tells the cat: *“I see you, I respect your space, and I’ll let you decide if you’d like to say hello.”*

HOW TO TEACH IT

1. **Give the cat space.** Avoid walking straight up to them or reaching out right away. Let the cat choose to come closer if they want to.
2. **Turn your body slightly sideways.** Facing a cat head-on can feel intimidating. Standing or sitting at an angle can signal that you are non-threatening.
3. **Use soft eyes and a gentle voice.** Avoid staring directly into their eyes. Slow blinking or softening your gaze can communicate calm and friendliness.
4. **Offer your index finger to the cat.** Slowly extend your finger at their nose level and let the cat come forward to sniff. This mimics how cats greet each other- by exchanging scents.
5. **Wait for their response.** If the cat leans in, sniffs, or rubs against your hand, it’s an invitation to continue to move into petting. If they back away, freeze, or flatten ears, that’s a “no, thank you.”
6. **Keep movements slow and predictable.** Sudden gestures can startle them. Move at a calm, steady pace to show respect for their comfort zone.

TRAINING TIPS

- **Respect their answer.** If they walk away or turn their head, give them space. You can try again later when they are more comfortable.
- **Offer different scents.** Prior to offering your polite greeting- touch your nose to add more of your scent to your finger. Touch a treat or some catnip to see what effect those scents have on your cat. If you plan on varying scents- do it in separate sessions as to not overwhelm them.
- **Pair greetings with rewards.** If the cat stays calm or investigates you, quietly drop a treat nearby to reinforce that calm behavior.
- **End on a positive note.** Stop interacting before the cat feels overwhelmed- success is a calm, neutral experience, not necessary contact.

Consent Petting

WHAT IS IT?

Consent petting is the practice of reading your cat's body language to determine if, when, and how they want to receive physical affection. This practice is about promoting autonomy and choice in your cat and can be extremely helpful for more shy or nervous cats.

WHY ASK FOR CONSENT?

We ask cats for consent to help build trust, ensure their comfort, and promote safer, more respectful interactions. When cats feel they have a choice, they're more likely to engage willingly and build a stronger bond with you because you are listening to their signals and working with them, not against them.

HOW TO TEST FOR CONSENT

1. Pet or scratch the cat on their chest or shoulders.
2. Pet for 3 seconds and then stop.
3. If your cat says YES continue! If your cat says NO stop petting.

TRAINING TIPS

1. **Signs for yes, keep petting!**
 - Paws at you for more
 - Nudges you
 - Moves into your space- or climbs on your lap!
 - Loose body language
2. **Signs for no, stop petting!**
 - Does nothing
 - Shrinks away and avoids the touch
 - Moves away after touch
 - Tense body language, dilated pupils, or hisses or growls
3. **If your cat says no to petting, think of another way to engage with them.**
 - Toss a toy
 - Engage in rewards based training
 - Sit with quietly with them while you read or check your emails
 - Talk softly to them

Desensitization to Approach

WHAT IS DESENSITIZATION?

A gradual process that helps shy, fearful, and/or under-socialized cats become more comfortable with human approach for interaction.

WHY PRACTICE DESENSITIZATION?

Cats may become fearful for many reasons—sometimes because they didn't have enough positive experiences with people or new situations as kittens, or because they have had stressful or frightening events in their past. When a cat feels unsure or scared, they might avoid being approached or choose to hide when new people come near. This can make it harder for potential adopters to see their true personality. A fearful cat may also withdraw from normal daily activities like eating, grooming, sleeping, or playing, which can affect their overall well-being. With patience, gentle handling, and a calm environment, these cats can learn to feel safe and start showing their loving, curious sides.

HOW TO DESENSITIZE:

First, find a desirable reward for the learner – something special that will help change some of those negative feelings to positive ones: lickables such as churru, cream cheese, or baby food are often popular!

1. Enter the room slowly and quietly while keeping your distance from the cat.
2. Choose a spot in the room to sit/stand away from the cat (you will want to be as close to the cat's level as possible, so you are not a threatening presence).
3. Offer praise and rewards at a distance without actively engaging with the cat or entering their space.
4. If the cat remains relaxed after receiving a few rewards, move a small amount closer to the cat.
 - a. If the cat remains relaxed, repeat the process of giving rewards and praise at this distance.
 - b. If the cat displays signs that they are uncomfortable (becoming tense, moving away, licking lips, vocalizing, hiding) return to a distance where the cat is comfortable and continue pairing praise/rewards with your presence.
3. When you get close enough, you may start feeding the cat after you present your finger as a polite greeting, and they engage with it (just looking, or sniffing).

TRAINING TIPS:

- **Take it slow:** all training should be paced to the cat's comfort level regardless of our own personal goals and expectations!
- **Desensitization is a gradual process.** Remember that one large step forward might force you several steps in the wrong direction.

Target Training

WHAT IS IT?

Target training teaches your cat to touch a specific object—often a target stick, your hand, or even a post—with their nose or paw. The “target” becomes a tool you can use to guide your cat’s movement and focus. It’s usually taught with a clicker or marker-word and followed by a reward.

WHY TEACH IT?

Target training is a great first skill for cats because it builds confidence and makes learning other behaviors easier. It allows you to guide your cat without picking them up, which reduces stress, and has many practical uses—like helping them enter a carrier, get into position for nail trims, or shift attention away from unwanted behaviors. Plus, once they know how to target, you can use it to teach fun tricks like spins, jumps, or weaving, keeping training both useful and enjoyable.

HOW TO TEACH IT

1. Nose Target or Paw Target

- Before you begin your training session, decide if you want your cat to target with their nose, or with their paw.
- Work on these behaviors in separate training sessions when first learning.

2. Choose Your Target

- For a nose target you may use a chopstick, wooden spoon, or a commercial target stick. Your finger or open hand works too!
- For teaching a paw target, using your open hand or a post-it note can work like a charm!

3. Introduce The Target

- Present the target just a few inches from your cat’s nose or paw.
- When they sniff or touch it, immediately use your marker (click or “yes”) and treat.

4. Build Repetition

- Repeat till your cat deliberately moves toward the target to touch it.
- Keep the target close at first, then gradually increase the distance.

5. Add Movement

- Begin moving the target slightly so your cat must step or stretch to reach it.

6. Introduce a Cue

- Say “touch” just before your cat reaches the target.
- Plan to use different cues for nose and paw targets so your cat doesn’t get confused!

7. Expand Applications

- Guide your cat onto a scale, into a carrier, or onto a perch.
- Use the target to teach spins, jumps, or recall.

Target Training (Cont.)

TRAINING TIPS

- **Start easy:** hold the target close enough that success is a guarantee.
- **Use small steps:** don't move the target too far too soon- gradual progress prevents frustration.
- **Short sessions:** 2-5 minutes is plenty. Stop before your cat loses interest.
- **High-value rewards:** use treats your cat loves to keep motivation high.
- **Consistency matters:** Always mark (click or "yes") the moment of touch to keep communication clear.
- **Trouble shooting:** If your cat ignores the target, try placing a small amount of tuna juice on it, or holding it closer. If they get distracted, reset by making the target easier to reach.
- **End on a good note:** End on a successful repetition so they'll look forward to the next session.

The Name Game

WHY PLAY THE NAME GAME?

Playing the name game with your pet teaches them to LOVE responding to their name right away, because they expect it to be a super fun game!

HOW TO TEACH IT

Reinforce the pattern:

1. Grab a few of your pet's favorite treats, in small pieces.
2. Get their attention (kissy noises are usually great!)
3. Give them a treat, but toss it or set it down instead of hand feeding
4. When your pet turns back after eating, give them another treat

Use their name:

5. Just before your pet turns toward you, say their name
6. When they look, toss their treat away, or place it behind them
7. Repeat

TRAINING TIPS

- Keep treats handy at home and on walks so you can call your pet's name at random and reward them for looking at you!
- Reward with non-food rewards, too! Call their name and toss their favorite toy when they look, or offer them some affection.
- If your pet is doing something naughty, don't use their name. If their name is associated with scolding, they can learn to run away when called!