

Shy Kittens

Patience is the most important ingredient you will need to help your kitten overcome her fear or shyness. The guardian of a fearful kitten will need consistent time to spend with the kitten and the patience not to push her past her level of comfort. How soon you will be able to cuddle with your shy kitten will vary depending on the kitten's age, temperament and genetics. Depending on the individual temperament of the kitten, what she has observed from her mother, and how old she is, she may hiss, spit or strike out—or simply try to run away and hide. Some fearful kittens learn to trust people quickly, while others take a lot longer. Generally speaking, older very shy kittens will need more time and patience than young shy kittens. Progress through the following steps slowly—do not proceed to the next step if your kitten appears fearful.

Confinement to a small quiet room. The bathroom (toilet lid down) with a litterbox on one side of the room and dry food and water on the other side, and some toys works well. Most bedrooms where cats can get under or behind the bed do not work well. This is a critical step. Shy felines not confined will not overcome their fears.



Do:

- Place a cardboard box, hidey bed or carrier (tie the door open) in the room so your kitten has a place to hide. Hiding is a coping mechanism for cats and it's important to provide a "safe" place.
- Visit her several times a day, enter the room slowly and talk softly so she gets used to your voice. Try to provide several 20-minute socialization visits a day.
- Clean the litter box as needed.
- Leave a radio or TV on in her room on low volume.

Don't:

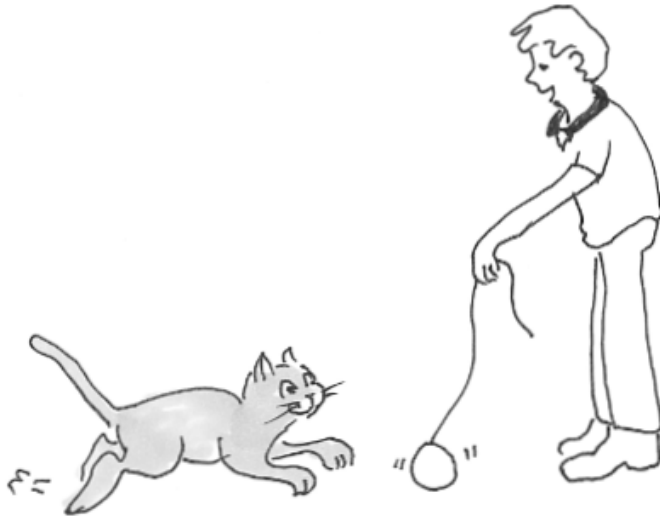
- Never attempt to pull a kitten out from her hiding place. This will increase her fearfulness of you and can result in you being bitten or scratched.
- Do not try to pet her yet.

Use wet food to make friends! Have set times to feed her wet food and stay in the room when you feed. Have dry food out all the time. Your kitten needs to associate you with all good things so use the wet food to your advantage. Place the bowl close to her and then move away. Read out loud softly (good time to check your email!) and try not to look at your kitten. Remove the food dish when you leave. She'll learn that your presence signals something very special to eat. Use treats or chicken baby food if she will not eat the wet food. Or try offering the baby food on a spoon.



If she is eating well in your presence, move the bowl gradually closer to where you are sitting, but resist the urge to reach out and pet her. When she is comfortable eating near you, put the bowl down and place your hand near the bowl. When she can eat with your hand next to the bowl, place the bowl down and leave one hand touching the bowl. When she can eat with your hand touching the bowl, try stroking her lightly on the

side of her cheek and an ear rub with the hand that was touching the bowl. Most kittens accept this type of stroking better than a hand coming over their head. If she becomes fearful and runs away—let her. Allow her to return when she is ready.



Use wand toys to build confidence and as a fun way to bond. Wand toy play is a great way to bring your kitten close to you without pressuring her to be petted. She will be too busy chasing the wand toy across the room and across your legs. The best toys are interactive like ribbon wands, Cat Catchers and Cat Dancers. If your kitten stays close after a play session, reward her with more treats or wet food. Make sure there are plenty of toys out for your kitten to play with on her own (balls, toy mice, etc.), but put the wand toys away when you aren't playing with them. If you hear her playing with her toys on her own it means she is becoming comfortable in her space.

Lure her to you. Once your kitten is coming into your space reliably, you can pet her more and more, but allow her to retreat as needed. While sitting on the floor, tempt her back to you with treats or toys to your lap. This may involve several attempts to lure her into your lap with wet food, baby food or treats. Keep the treats or food going as she sits in your lap getting petted. Gradually work into longer petting sessions.

Lap time: While sitting on the ground, lure your kitten to your side with food or treats. Have some treats on your lap also. If she is comfortable, gently and slowly place one hand under the chest and the other on her hindquarters and gently place her on your lap where she can eat her treats. If she panics, she is not ready to be picked up. If all goes well, continue to practice the “Lap Scoop.”

When your kitten is comfortable with all of these steps and readily approaches, you can now practice picking her up from a standing position. First offer a treat when your kitten comes up to you. Make sure she is enjoying her cheek and ear scratching, bend low to your kitten and gently lift her to your chest. If she appreciates this and doesn't squirm, hold her to your chest and continue petting. If she is not enjoying the interaction, then let her down and go back to the prior step before trying again. Some kittens just aren't keen on being picked up. They will come to your lap and like to be in your lap, but they want it to be their idea. They are still bonded with you; they just want to keep control of the situation.

Introduce her to a bigger space. Lastly, after she has bonded with you and grown to trust you, gradually introduce your kitten to the rest of your home one room at a time. Close any other bathroom and bedroom doors first. Always allow her to escape back to her “safe room” if she becomes overwhelmed. Providing a few hidey beds and cat shelving in the new rooms will give her places to chill in the new rooms.

Introduce her to new people using the same slow techniques that you have learned. Remember that many of these shy and fearful kittens bond extremely well with their guardians but may remain fearful and shy with strangers or in new situations. She may need to retreat to her “safe” room or her hidey beds when strangers come to visit.

Feline Resources:

We are here to help. Marin Humane's Behavior & Training department conducts various [cat workshops](#). Sign up on our Cat Behavior (MarinHumane.org/catclasses) page. We also have Cat Behavior Consultants who are available for private training or consultations (phone, online or in-home) at 415.506.6284 or CatBehavior@MarinHumane.org. More information about cat behavior is available on our website at MarinHumane.org/cathandouts