

Hisses to Kisses: Modifying Extreme Fear in Kittens

Many kittens come from situations where they have had limited exposure to humans. If you are socializing, adopting, or fostering a kitten **that hisses, spits, and retreats at human approach**, we've taken the techniques that our Behavior and Training department uses in shelter and made you a step-by-step guide to helping your under-socialized friend gain confidence.

Confine to a sanctuary room for at least 14 days—the smaller the better. Bathrooms are often ideal. This room should have everything the kitten needs, including bedding, litterbox, food and water, and a few **safe hiding places** that you can access easily. Fearful kittens can get “stuck” hiding behind furniture, and too much space often leads to litter box accidents. Smaller rooms ensure that the only hiding places available to the kitten are ones that you can access easily. Offering fearful kittens a safe, controlled environment is the basis for successful behavior modification. Cats thrive with familiar territories and predictable routines. The larger the area is, the longer the kitten will take to feel secure there.

We want to create the association that hands/being handled = good things. The best way to do this is with food! It doesn't only have to be at mealtimes (though you can use meals for desensitization training as well). Examples of treats are unseasoned lunch meat, all-meat baby food, temptations/greenie treats, small pieces of sardines, etc.

1. **First introductions (hissing/cowering stage).** Talk to them softly, blink your eyes slowly at them, tilt your head to the side (these are postures cats use to communicate that they are non-threatening). Then extend a bit of something delicious towards them using an object such as a pen or a popsicle stick. Get it near, under, or touching their nose. Continue talking gently to them as they eat. Do this several times a day if possible. If possible, try feeding them this way.
2. **Beginning to touch.** Try offering a treat-less pen or popsicle stick or back scratcher, and using it to pet their foreheads/cheeks/chin. Look for blinking/leaning in/relaxing of their body posture. Stop the petting and follow up with a tasty treat. Do this several times a day if possible, aiming for 5-10min sessions. Once they feel comfortable being pet by an object, work your hand down the object until your hand is what is petting them. Reward with a treat/toy, or more petting, if it looks like they enjoy it! **MAKE SURE TO TAKE FREQUENT BREAKS IN BETWEEN PETTING.** *NOTE: **Don't use fingers to offer food—kittens will often bite down on fingers instead of licking them.**
3. **NO towel wrapping/ “purrito” wraps.** Though in the past kittens have been taught to learn to endure handling this way, the scientific behavioral community has moved away from this technique because it can create a negative association with handling and can actually *slow* their socialization progress!
4. **Try toys!** Some kittens are even more interested in toys than they are in food and can make FAST progress using play. Choose wisely though—big or loud toys can be scary for under-socialized kittens, so try a piece of string or a small ball of paper. *Think “bug” rather than “mouse.”* You may want to start by offering the toy from around a corner while you are out of sight. **NEVER use fingers as toys!**
5. **Begin “picnicking!”** Once your kittens are expecting good things from you, grab some reinforcers and park yourself in the kitten's space. Read a book, watch a movie on your laptop (with headphones!) etc. Don't solicit interaction, but if they come out to investigate—reinforce!
6. **Increasing space.** As kittens get older and become more confident in their space, you can gradually increase the areas they have to explore. Do this in stages—for example opening the bathroom to the entire bedroom at once may not be advisable. Even if they begin confidently, they could panic and hide somewhere inaccessible. If you have them, **use an “exercise pen” or baby gates to control their movement.** Hallways are good transitional spaces—doorways can be blocked off to kittens, and they can explore and play with toys in a neutral space. Make sure they have an escape route back to “safety!”
7. **Pair these outings and introductions to new people with treats or toys!** You want to show your kitten that good things happen when they try new things.

Take your time! All of these steps will progress at different times for different kittens/litters. Go at their pace, don't rush, and try to keep to a consistent schedule. This provides them some predictability, which helps them to adjust. And don't be discouraged! Generally, the acclimation process for cats in a new environment is at least 2 WEEKS! Keeping a written or video log of your progress is a great way to see how far you've come.