



FORGOTTEN FELINES
Of Sonoma County

FOR EVACUEES with their cats

How to introduce your cat to a new temporary environment

Going to a new home is one of the most stressful and frightening experiences in a cat or kitten's life. Being with you will make the process easier. Some cats adapt readily to a new environment and are contentedly purring away in their owners' laps in a few hours, while others take days or weeks, trembling and hiding. The majority of cats will be traumatized to some degree by the change, and will find its new environment strange and frightening.

You can minimize the stress your kitty experiences if you follow a few simple rules:

A Separate Room to Start

Being in its own room, separated from the rest of the household will allow the kitty to become accustomed to the sounds and smells in its new space without the additional stress of confronting a larger, complex physical environment.

This can be any quiet room - a bedroom or bathroom with a closed window is ideal. Place a litter box, bed, scratching post (if possible), and food and water dishes in this room. Bring in the carrier containing the cat, close the door to the room, and open carrier door. Leave the open carrier in the room so the cat will have somewhere familiar to hide.

Give your kitty the same type of food it was receiving in its previous location, at least at first. Sudden dietary changes can cause unpleasant digestive upsets. Do a gradual blending of old food to new food, if this can be arranged.

The cat should be allowed to come out of the carrier when it's ready to -- don't force it.

How to React to Anxiety and Crying

You can comfort the cat by talking to it quietly, petting it gently, and if it doesn't seem too frightened, picking it up and holding it in your lap. Sometimes, however, the cat is too frightened, and it is more appropriate to allow it to hide. Don't force your attention on your pet. Spend as much time in the room with the cat as you possibly can. This will bring an immense amount of comfort to your cat. Your presence can be the single most important factor in the adaptation process. Your voice and your smells will go a long way toward calming your cat, even if you are not interacting directly with the cat.



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Your Cat and Small Children

If you have small children, they will be traumatized to some extent themselves, and may find it therapeutic to be with their pet. You need to use your best judgment whether their attentions will be accepted by the cat, or whether it would be better if they leave the kitty alone during this time. Small children can make sudden loud noises and movements that can be particularly terrifying to cats.

In some cases, even though your cat knows the children, the whole evacuation process, including your own stress and fear, may contribute to the cat's fear, and it would be best to re-introduce the children to the cat gradually. Ideally these visits should occur when the child is in a quiet, attentive mood. Explain to your child that kitty is scared, and that "we need to be calm and quiet so kitty will understand that it is safe here." This can have a bonus benefit: it gives the children something to focus on that they can help with – making kitty feel safe. This can alleviate some of their helplessness and fear and anxiety. A win-win!

When to Let Kitty Out of the Room

How soon you open the door to the kitty's room depends on the kitty, whether or not there are other pets in the household, and how "temporary" this housing situation will be. Your cat is ready to come out when it no longer behaves fearfully (running away from you or cowering). If there are you have other animals in the home, the new kitty should stay in its own room for as long as possible. This room will begin to then smell like the newcomer, and the resident cats will be more likely to treat the room as the newcomer's territory. They will be fully aware of the presence of the new cat, and the new cat will be aware of them. There will probably be a lot of sniffing, even growling, going on under the door. The new cat will, in a sense, have created a refuge to retreat to, when you finally open the door.

If you are introducing the kitty to a home with a dog, particularly a dog which has not previously lived with cats, do not leave them together unsupervised. Dogs should be leashed the first few times that they are introduced to the cat when you feel it is safe to let the cat out of its carrier.

Start with sharing the bedding smells of the new cat with the resident dogs and cats. Let them sniff as much as they want. Conversely, take their smells into the room to share with the new cat. Gradually move to having the cat in a carrier, with the dogs or other cats in the room.

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When to Let Kitty Out of the Room (continued)

Let everybody see each other. Let the other animals leave the room if they desire. A lot will depend on the personality of the visitor cat. Shy or outgoing, timid or confident, already known to be comfortable with dogs or other cats – all that will affect the process. Use common sense. Remove a barking dog, or a snarling hissing cat, from the room.

If the resident cat hisses or growls, or the dog barks, NEVER scold them. Instead, separate the animals and comfort the resident dogs or cats first. You are reassuring them that they are not being replaced! They NEED you to reconfirm your love to them.

If this is a short term, temporary home based on an evacuation, if at all possible, DO NOT introduce kitty to the rest of the four-legged household at all. Unless the temporary stay is going to be for more than a month, or space constraints prevent the isolating of the evacuated cat, everyone is better off with the animals separated.

What NOT To Do When You Open the Door

NEVER force your kitty out of its refuge before it is ready. When you open the door, let the cat come out when the cat wants to come out, not when you want the cat to come out. If you attempt to do so, your kitty will be even more fearful and distrustful of you, which can lead to the cat trying to escape from its new home.

Keep the Cat Inside (while keeping kitty from getting too bored)!

If this is a temporary housing situation, DO NOT let the cat outside at all. You will only create a new problem if kitty goes missing. Nobody needs that.

Cats have strong directional senses, and a cat permitted outdoors too soon will attempt to return to its previous home, rarely succeeding. However, you can provide much of the enjoyment your cat would obtain from the outdoors by giving them toys, putting pet-proof screens over a few windows (so the cat can safely sit and gaze out), growing wheat or oat grass in a pot for the cat's gastronomic pleasure, and supplying some form of scratching post. Although we say the cat is "sharpening their claws," what they are actually doing is stretching muscles, relieving tension, and getting old sheaths to fall off their claws. It's a great way to work off anxiety, too!

In normal situations, cats should never be let outdoors until they have had at least 4 weeks to acclimate INSIDE their new home.