

Helping the Scaredycats

Give cats a chance in their new homes by preparing adopters for reclusive getting-to-know-you behaviors

BY KIMBERLY BARRY, Ph.D.



As many of us know all too well, adopters expecting cats to curl up pillowside the first night in a new home may end up sorely disappointed. Creatures of habit, some cats go borderline-catatonic when plunked down in an unfamiliar environment, diving under the bed or behind the sofa and barely emerging for days. At the shelter where I work, the Town Lake Animal Center in Austin, Texas, adopters who don't know any better sometimes return their frightened pets.

That's unfortunate—because in many cases, the cats have simply been introduced to the family and house too

quickly, without being given enough time to adjust to the surroundings. By confining cats in the beginning and then gradually introducing them to their domain and other animals in residence, adopters can help these frightened animals ease more comfortably into their new lives.

We in shelters work hard to reduce stress for cats and help adopters succeed. We have limited time with new adopters, and they, in their excitement, may have limited attention spans. Still, despite the realities of the animal shelter environment and the excitement of the adoption process, we can help ensure the transition goes as smoothly as possible.

To assist adopters in preparing their family and home for a new cat, encourage them to think about issues they may not yet have considered:

- Where will the cat's toys, bed, and other things be kept?
- Where will the cat stay when first introduced to the house? (Adopters may want to limit access to certain rooms at first to give cats time to adjust.)
- Where will the cat stay when he's home alone?
- What safety issues—such as exposed wires and poisonous plants—need addressing?
- What routines can adopters establish to help the cat get comfortable in the house?

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Kimberly Barry, a certified animal behaviorist, received her master's degree in animal learning and doctorate in biopsychology from the **University of Georgia**. She was in private practice for eight years and has been at the **Town Lake Animal Center in Austin, Texas**, for more than six years. At the shelter, she develops behavior assessments and programs that enhance adoptability. She also works on stress reduction for shelter animals and serves as the dangerous dog hearing officer for the city of Austin.

however, were described as part of play. Twenty-five percent of the kittens fought with another cat in the house in the first month following adoption. Also within the first month, 26 percent of kittens had eliminated outside the box—a figure that dropped to only 8 percent after one year. Given these numbers, a “kittens will be kittens” attitude is entirely appropriate for new adopters.

Encouraging adopters to prepare their homes and providing basic information about shelter cats can help families form strong bonds with their new cats quickly. The fewer difficulties they encounter during the transition, the more they'll be able to focus on the joys—rather than the frustrations—of living with cats. **AS**



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