

Helping a Shy Cat Blossom

Many cats exhibit shy behavior here at HSWM because the shelter is a loud and unpredictable place. However, most of these cats will be confident and outgoing once they feel safe in their new home.

Start Small

Too much new territory is overwhelming for most cats so it's important to set them up in one small room in the beginning. A bathroom may be best because bedrooms are likely to have more hiding spots. If using a bedroom, you may need to block off the area under the bed. While hiding spots can help your cat feel safe, you need to be able to interact with her even when she's hiding. A cardboard box on it's side makes for an ideal hiding spot for your cat.

Be Patient

Don't touch your new cat right away. The first step to earning a cat's trust is to show that you're not trying to grab or do anything to them. Give her at least a few hours to adjust to the room. Then, start spending some time in the room with her. Reading aloud in a soft voice can help her get accustomed to your presence. You may also gently toss her some treats (we've found that most cats enjoy Temptations brand.) Pay attention to your cat's body language (see chart) and wait until she's improving before moving to the next step.

	Fearful/Shy	Unsure/Improving	Relaxed/Friendly
Ears	pinned flat against head	lowered, turned to the side "airplane" ears	upright, facing forward
Eyes	wide-eyed pupils dilated	slow-blinking pupils partially dilated	slow-blinking or closed pupils relaxed
Body	huddled muscles tense leaning away or poised to flee	more relaxed will expose chin or lean into petting	very relaxed might expose belly purring
Tail	tucked completely under body puffed up if startled	kept close to body held low if cat is walking around	relaxed tail held up if cat is walking around

Play and Petting

It's a good idea to use interactive play as a gateway to petting a shy cat. Our favorite interactive toy for shy cats is called a "Cat Dancer" but most wand toys should work. Do not fling the toy at the cat! Instead, dangle it gently from side to side in front of your cat. She may just want to watch it at first. If your cat engages with the toy, you can start using it to slowly "pet" the cat's cheeks from a safe distance. Once the cat learns that being "petted" by the toy feels good and she starts leaning into it, slowly offer your closed hand. Extend your index finger and allow her to sniff it. If she growls or hisses, she needs more time. If she appears relaxed, go ahead and pet her slowly on the cheeks and chin. Don't pet her along her body until she starts coming out of hiding.

Don't Force It

Don't force interactions. Never force your cat out of hiding. She needs to be the one to initiate social activities like cuddling. Some cats progress faster than others. Patience is key.

Expand Territory

Once your cat is comfortable and social in the small room, open the door and allow her to explore the rest of the home. Don't force her out of her comfort zone but give her the chance to leave it naturally, when she's ready. Most cats will venture out cautiously and slowly, but if they're startled they'll run back to their familiar room. Keep that room set up as her home base and make sure she has access to it until she feels safe in the rest of the home.