

## Getting Started with Your New Cat

**Congratulations on welcoming a new cat into your family!** The MSPCA-Angell adoption center teams are here to support you and your new pet. Please reach out to us with any questions or concerns as they transition into your home.

**CONFINEMENT SPACE AND DECOMPRESSION:** Change can be hard for anyone! Remember that your cat is new to your home and has just experienced the stress of a shelter stay. They will need time to get to know you, what you expect of them, and where to find things like their food, water, litter box, and scratching posts.

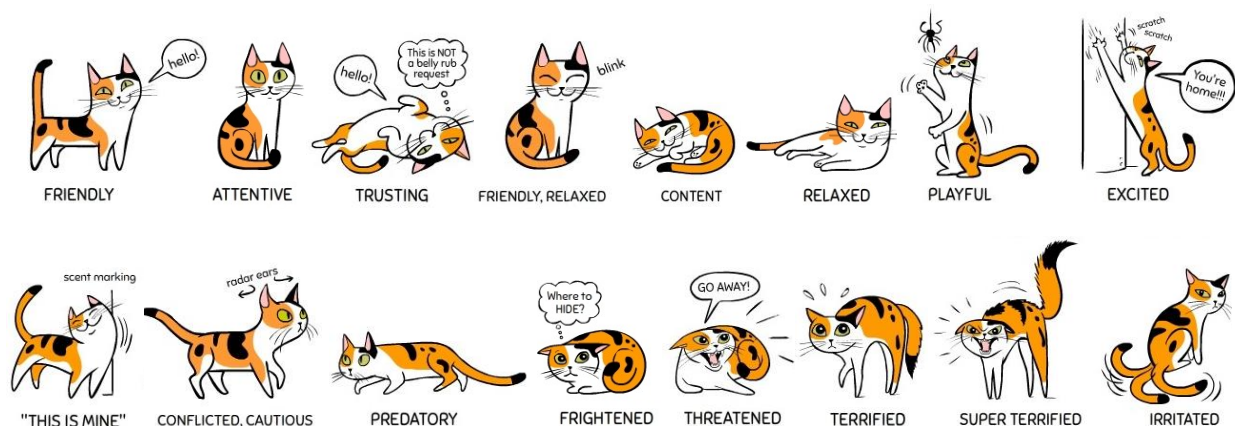
- Ease their transition by confining them to one area (bathroom, laundry room, small bedroom) for the first several days, or until they are confidently exploring their space, consistently using their litterbox, and readily interacting with you - every cat's timeline is different!
- Monitor to ensure your cat is eating, drinking, urinating, and defecating normally
- Allow them to initiate every interaction, and observe their behavior to determine likes and dislikes
- Avoid potential stressors such as nail trims, grooming, and introductions to other pets
- If they are hiding within their confinement space, let them be! Forcing them to come out of hiding, even to comfort them, will prolong the decompression period and can make them more afraid

**MANAGEMENT:** Refers to limiting the number of “wrong” choices your cat has access to in order to encourage making “right” choices.

- Remove potential hazards like string, ribbon, rubber/hair bands, paper clips, earrings, wrappers, etc.
- Secure cords, windows, and prevent access to small spaces, like around a washer or dryer
- Check your home for plants poisonous to cats ([www.mass.gov/doc/petsafe-plants/download](http://www.mass.gov/doc/petsafe-plants/download))
- Close doors to prevent unsupervised exploration of things like toilet bowls and trash cans
- Keep your new cat separated from other pets until they're ready for introductions (see *below*)

**BODY LANGUAGE:** Cats communicate through their body language. As you get to know your cat, you'll easily be able to tell when they are uncomfortable, when they are excited, when they are relaxed, etc. Some cats are lap cats, others prefer to sit next to you on the sofa, and some prefer to play rather than be pet. Observe your cat to learn their likes and dislikes, and respect their preferences!

- **Behavior as communication:** Cats use behavior to express their needs; a cat that is hissing or swatting might need more space, a cat that is head butting might want attention
- **Your body language:** Slowly blinking your eyes, sitting side-facing versus head-on, tilting your head to one side, and speaking softly are strategies for making fast friends with your new companion



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# Getting Started with Your New Cat



## CATS need...

### 1. SAFE SPACES in Every Room

**HIDING SPACES**  
Hiding is a normal response to being scared or overwhelmed. Don't disturb.

**WARM SPACES**  
sunny spots, heater/blankets

**HIGH UP SPACES**  
with more than one way up and down.

**CONVENIENT LITTER BOX**  
scooped clean, in a quiet location with low foot traffic



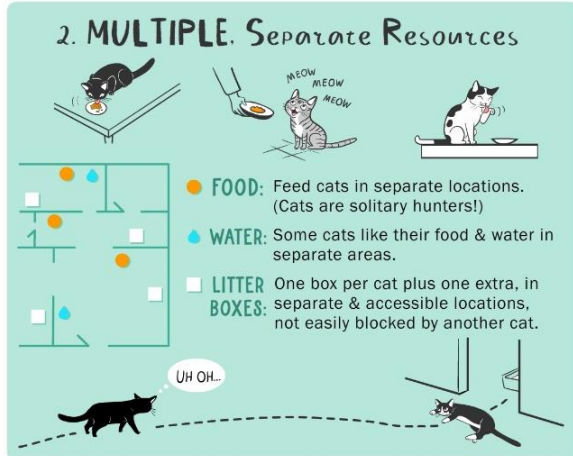
### 2. MULTIPLE, Separate Resources

**FOOD:** Feed cats in separate locations. (Cats are solitary hunters!)

**WATER:** Some cats like their food & water in separate areas.

**LITTER BOXES:** One box per cat plus one extra, in separate & accessible locations, not easily blocked by another cat.


UH OH...



### 3. PLAY & Predatory Behaviors

**INTERACTIVE PLAY**  
Cats NEED predatory experiences! Simulate the hunting experience by making toys move like prey. Rotate toys to keep things interesting.

**FOOD PUZZLES**  
Puzzle feeders for foraging and tiny frequent meals.



### 4. POSITIVE & CONSISTENT Social Interactions

**CONSENT + CHOICE**  
Respect what your cat likes and doesn't like as an individual. \* Learn cat body language!

**NO FORCE, NO PUNISHMENT**  
grabbing spraying shouting scruffing

**SOCIALIZE**  
... kittens to positive handling (between 2-7 weeks)

CHIRP!  
SLOW BLINK  
STOP PETTING ME  
OK  
HUMANS ARE OK!



### 5. FAMILIAR SCENTS for Trust & Security

**FAMILIAR BEDDING**

**SCRATCHING POSTS**

**FACIAL MARKING**  
on things

USE SCENTS TO INTRODUCE NEW ANIMALS SAFELY  
Would you like to smell your new housemate?

**DO NOT:**  
use scented litter  
use scented cleaners  
clean away all familiar scents



### 6. REWARD BASED TRAINING for Good Welfare

Use what your cat likes (eg, their favorite treats) to teach new skills & provide positive experiences.

**CARRIER TRAINING**  
for travel, vet visits, & emergencies

**HEALTH EXAMS**

**DENTAL CARE**

**TRICKS + GAMES**  
for fun and bonding

**TAKING MEDS**

**TAKING WEIGHT**

**NAIL TRIMS**

**BRUSHING/GROOMING**

Hi 5!



ILLUSTRATION: Lili Chin [doggiedrawings.net/freeposters](http://doggiedrawings.net/freeposters)

REFERENCES: "PURR: The Science of Making Your Cat Happy" by Zazie Todd (2022)

"AAFP and ISFM Feline Environmental Needs Guidelines" by Sarah Ellis & Colleagues (2013)

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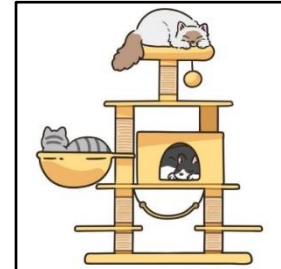
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## Getting Started with Your New Cat

**“CATIFY” YOUR CONFINEMENT SPACE AND HOME ENVIRONMENT:** With a little preparation, cat care can be a breeze! There are several items that are important for your cat to have access to, beginning in their confinement space, and eventually expanding to your whole home when they are ready.

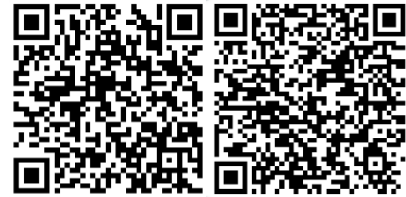
### High Spaces and Hiding Spots

- Not just for scaredy cats - even the most well-adjusted cats often prefer elevated or hiding spots for resting, such as cat trees or cat carriers with the door left open rather than beds on the floor
- Remove access to spaces you don't want your cat to hide like under beds or couches - close the door or roll a towel to block access
- Do not disturb a hiding cat - let them hide if they want to!
- Get creative! A cat bed on or in a book shelf or a cardboard box with a hole cut out can be great resting options for your cat



### Let Them Scratch!

- Scratching is a healthy, necessary cat behavior - to help them scratch appropriate surfaces, provide several different options and reward your cat for using them
- Some cats like to scratch horizontally, others prefer vertical posts, and some cats have substrate preferences such as sisal or rope - offer options to understand their preferences
- Punishment (raised voice, spray bottle, physical correction) for inappropriate scratching doesn't tell your cat what you'd like them to do instead, can lead to increased problem behavior in other areas, and can negatively impact their relationship with you; their behavior is expressing a need – it's our job to figure out how best to meet that need. Visit [catbehaviorassociates.com](http://catbehaviorassociates.com) for more information.



**LITTERBOX - WHAT, WHERE, HOW MANY?:** To ensure regular use, the litter box should be a stress-free, inviting space for your cat.

- Choose a location that is easily accessible to your cat and near where they choose to spend time
- Many cats prefer low-walled, uncovered boxes - consider individual needs (kittens, seniors)
- The litter box should be large enough for your cat to turn around, scratch, and dig readily
- Our recommendation is to provide one box per cat in your home, plus one extra (space permitting)
- Scoop litter at least once per day; how often you change the litter depends on number of cats, number of boxes, and type of litter you use
- Research suggests that cats prefer 2 inches of soft, fine-grained, unscented litter
- Avoid switching litter box location or litter type too often - if relocating the box, do so gradually
- Skip the harsh chemicals for routine cleaning, try a fragrance-free soap and hot water instead

**LEARNING:** Animals are always learning, whether we are intentionally teaching or not. It's our responsibility to help them learn the right thing, and to teach them in a way that creates a strong, trusting relationship based on clear communication between us and our pets. **See our training philosophy handout** for more information.

- **Management:** arrange the environment to prevent access to “wrong” choices, making it likely for your cat to make the “right” choice, and allowing you to say “yes” more often.
- **Reinforcement:** they won't know it was right unless you tell them - let them know when they do something you like by giving a snack, a scratch under the chin, or engaging in playtime with a toy.
- **Mistakes happen:** they're still learning! Ignore, or **neutrally** end the interaction and move onto something else. Take note of what went wrong to set them up for success the next time.



## Getting Started with Your New Cat

**PETTING CONSENT:** Give your cat choice and control during your interactions. Even the friendliest cat might not always want to be pet or picked up, especially when first adjusting to their new person. We can add to our cats' quality of life by giving them choice and control during our interactions with them. If your cat is asking for pets, give them plenty of breaks. Most cats, especially at first, prefer being petted around the head, cheeks, and chin - belly and tail can often be "out of bounds"! If they say "no thanks" to pets (tail twitching, moving away), try other ways of engaging.

**Happy cats, respectful humans**

✓ *do*

- Blink slowly
- Talk quietly
- Move predictably
- Approach from side on
- Crouch down to their level
- Let them come to you
- Interact with your cat for brief times (3-5 seconds), then pause and let them decide whether to continue



CROUCH DOWN TO THEIR LEVEL AND LET THEM COME TO YOU

✗ *don't*

- Approach directly, head on or from behind
- Stare or maintain direct eye contact
- Move quickly or unpredictably
- Grab cat if approaches
- Talk loudly or harshly
- Restrain your cat, enforce interactions such as cuddles, hold onto them if they are not engaged, or are trying to get away
- Manipulate them, e.g. to make their paws move, etc

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**MOUTHING, SCRATCHING, KICKING, OH MY!** Biting, scratching, and kicking are normal ways for cats to interact with their environment, and are ways they might communicate with you. Swatting or mouthing during petting, for example, might mean "please stop!", but at other times the same behavior might mean "let's play!"

### Do's

- Provide appropriate objects for chasing/biting (kicker toys, prey mimicking toys) and scratching (see above)
- Schedule regular structured playtime
- Pay close attention to their body language throughout every interaction

### Don'ts

- Use your hands or feet to initiate play
- Engage in play following use of mouth/claws
- Reprimand or otherwise punish your cat for using their mouth or claws on you

**ENRICHMENT & PLAYTIME:** A necessary part of caring for any cat who is comfortable with you and in their space. **See our Feline Enrichment handout** for more information.

- **Interactive play:** make a wand toy act like prey - birds or mice might race along or over couches, under tables, and on top of bookshelves, change speeds and directions, jump, and run away! *Cat Dancers, Da Bird, Kittycada, or KragonFly* are popular options.
- **Independent play:** toy mice, balls, or toys that they can kick with their back legs - even crumpled paper or a ping pong ball can be fun!
- **Variety is the spice of life!** Rotate access to new toys to keep them interested and engaged
- **Cat tunnels** are fun to play and hide in, and can also be a safe and cozy spot for a nap
- **Food puzzles:** upgrade a meal to an enriching activity - the goal is not to make it hard for your cat to access their food, but to let them engage in species specific behaviors like sniffing, digging, or tearing
- **Nature lovers:** bird watching through a window or outdoor adventures - consider a catio, a cat tent, or harness/leash training as ways to explore together
- **Clicker training is not just for dogs!** Training is a great way to work their brains, build your connection, and have some fun!

# Getting Started with Your New Cat

## Interactive CAT Play by Dr. Mikel Delgado



Toys that are left lying on the floor are "dead". They are boring. Fun toys are like prey! They are usually small and quiet, and they move!

Playing is an **interactive** experience: a simulated hunting experience that gives cats physical exercise and stimulates their brains. We tailor our play to our individual cat's needs. Are they a generalist or a specialist?

Playing is also a way to bond with our cat. Not all cats like to be cuddled.

Make play a daily habit or activity, eg. before their dinner or bedtime, and whenever they have the zoomies! Just as dogs need to go out for walks and to sniff, cats need enrichment and shouldn't be sleeping all day.

### Prey Types

for the SPECIALIST HUNTER\*

**feathers** eg, Da Bird



**mouse-like** eg, Cat Catcher



drag it away or across

**bug-like** eg, Cat Dancer

CORK or CARDBOARD

WIRE



good for shy cats jiggle gently

**snake-like** eg, Bamboozler

FRAYED ROPE




### food puzzles

Introduce as a choice and never force. Many cats enjoy these. [foodpuzzlesforcats.com](http://foodpuzzlesforcats.com)



### laser toys

...can be frustrating because cats can't catch them. Best use for short periods as a warm-up, then switch to a real toy.

**NOVELTY:** Rotate the toys to keep things interesting!

\*For safety reasons, interactive toys with string/wire should be stored securely after play.



### Play Tips

- **ALTERNATE SPEED OF MOVEMENT.** Try slow movements. Barely moving.

- **MOVE AWAY** from your cat or along a L-R plane.



- **MOVE UNDER SOMETHING.**



- Sounds of **RUSTLING** or **CRUNCHINESS** are exciting!

- **LET THEM WAIT.** Don't make it too easy or it will be boring.

- **NOT TOO CLOSE.** Cats can see the toy best when it is a few feet away.

- Give the **FULL HUNTING EXPERIENCE** - paws, mouth, and whiskers!



- Most importantly, **HAVE FUN** playing with your little hunter!

Have you played with your cat TODAY?

[whatyourcatwants.com](http://whatyourcatwants.com)

illustrated by Lili Chin 2021



## Getting Started with Your New Cat

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**INTRODUCTIONS TO OTHER PETS:** When introducing a new cat into a household with other pets, start with a **decompression period** as described above, with your new cat in their own space that is separate from other pets. Once they appear comfortable in their new space and with you, try some of the steps below while observing the behavior of each pet along the way.

**Long-term goal:** peaceful coexistence without a negative impact on anyone's quality of life; in many cases, animals have an increased quality of life as a result of companionship

**Short-term goal:** limit inherent stress as much as possible while laying a foundation for introductions

**Expectations:** all pets will likely experience changes in behavior due to stress, frustration, or excitement

- **Slow and steady:** the pet that is most nervous or afraid should set the pace, both animals should appear relaxed before moving onto the next step
- **Choice:** set up the space so that animals can opt into each step, or hang back to engage in a different, more comfortable activity like eating a snack, playing with a toy, or hiding in a box
- **One at a time:** for multi-pet homes, introduce one at a time so as not to overwhelm the new cat
- **Baby steps:** break the intro down into small steps - first they can hear and smell each other, then see each other, then interact with each other, for example
- **Physical barrier:** your new cat should be behind a closed door during their decompression period, until they and all other pets appear relaxed
- **Scent introductions:** let each pet rub against a sock or cloth, swap items to allow both animals to smell the other; repeat until both pets have a neutral or positive response to the scent
- **Visual introduction:** introduce adjustable lines of sight so they can see each other but cannot yet touch; try feeding, petting, or playing on opposite sides of a baby gate with a sheet to manage sightlines – the goal is to maintain calm behavior for both animals
- **Active supervision:** each step of the introduction should be supervised by an adult
- **Short and sweet:** keep interactions short and give plenty of breaks – try to end on a good note
- **How much stress is too much:** some communication of discomfort is normal (flattening ears, hissing, growling) – but excessive, prolonged, or increasing stress means you're going too fast!
- **Resources:** provide reliable access to resources for each animal (several options for food/water appropriately spaced, dog doesn't have access to litter box, multiple vertical surfaces, etc.)

Contact us if either animal is “stuck” at any one step without positive progress; STOP and call us right away if an animal responds aggressively during any step. **See cat introduction handouts** for more information.



### VETERINARY CARE AND GROOMING:

- Choose a Fear-Free Certified vet or practice, and/or a vet with the Low Stress Handling certification: *visit [mspca.org/medical-centers](https://mspca.org/medical-centers) for Fear Free veterinary care that supports homeless animals*
- Teach your cat to like their carrier at home to make vet visits less stressful - **see handout**.
- Use a **cooperative care** approach to gradually introduce more sensitive handling at home, like handling ears, paws, and mouth; combing or brushing their coat; teeth brushing. *Visit [fearfreehappyhomes.com](https://fearfreehappyhomes.com) for more information.*

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- [catbehaviorassociates.com](https://catbehaviorassociates.com)
- *Total Cat Mojo* by Jackson Galaxy and Mikel Delgado
- *Catification: Designing a Happy and Stylish Home for your Cat (and You!)* by Jackson Galaxy and Kate Benjamin
- *Purr: The Science of Making your Cat Happy* by Zazie Todd