

Handling Shelter Cats and Assessing Their Behavior

A Conversation with Joan Miller

Q. Joan, you've had over 30 years experience handling cats, both as a pedigreed cat breeder and as one of the nation's most sought after and respected cat show judges for the Cat Fanciers' Association (CFA). You've also spent a lot of time at various animal shelters and you have a few concerns about some shelter handling procedures....

A. My concern is that some assessments of cats in shelters are done without enough sensitivity to fundamental and normal cat characteristics. As a result, I worry that cats get mislabeled as problem cats, aggressive cats or cats unsuitable for placement. A misjudgment like that can mean a death sentence.

By the same token, when cats are properly and routinely handled in shelters, they're more relaxed, their behavior improves and they come across better to potential adopters, which helps to speed their placement.

Q. How does trouble start?

A. First, I think cats coming into shelters need at least a 24 hour cooling off period. Shelters are very stressful places and to try to observe a cat's temperament when he first comes in is often impossible, especially for strays.

I think the way cats are housed and cared for in that first 24 hours can make all the difference. Many shelters initially put cats in isolated dreary cage areas where the cat hears strange sounds, smells strange cats and looks directly at other cats. The cats' behavior is then more of a negative reaction to perceived danger.

Cats new to a shelter seem to adjust better when safely caged in a pleasant, well lighted room full of human activity—a kitchen, staff offices, a treatment room or even a storage room/alcove. Putting a cat in a moderately busy, bustling area (without dogs), where he can observe some activity but feel safe, can help him adapt more quickly to the strange new surroundings. It also helps to introduce background noise, music, quiet cleaning activity and people coming and going without confronting the cat directly. If other cats must be in the room, place them several feet away or at least mixed by gender so that male/neutered cats aren't face to face with other male cats. Once cats get the hang of the routine, the people and smells, their curiosity starts to overcome their caution/fear instincts and they are then more ready to accept handling.

In order for cats to feel at ease, it's best to house them waist high or higher. When cats are looked down upon, they feel fearful. In the three tiered metal cages that cats are usually placed in, the cats on the bottom row are at a distinct disadvantage. I would advise using these bottom cages for holding carriers used during cage cleaning.

It's also best not to have a lot of loud noises like barking coming from another room. When cats hear noise but can't see the cause of it, it scares them.

Q. During this 24 hour downtime, should people just put food in the cage and ignore the cats completely, or should they try to pet them?

A. That depends on the cat. For example, if you open a can of cat food and the cat responds by coming up to the front of the cage, some interaction would probably be welcome immediately. If the cat looks terrified, he needs more time just to watch and adjust.

Q. Now the 24 hours is over. Do you think a physical exam should be combined with a temperament assessment?

A. Absolutely not. A physical exam, with its poking and prodding, should be done after an initial calming handling session and first assessment, ideally by a different person, and at a different time. Vet exams can be frightening to even many social cats and definitely could skew any assessment. In addition, it helps if the veterinarian incorporates good handling techniques during the physical exam.

Q. So, we're getting ready to assess the cat's temperament. But first we need to get him out of his cage...

A. In many shelters, where practicality is paramount, shelter handling is often based on more forceful methods than I believe are necessary. In my opinion, using force on cats—pulling them out of cages head first and handling by the scruff of the neck, brings out the worst in cats, causes resistance, and can invite aggression. This makes it hard to truly evaluate temperament. Practices such as dangling cats without letting their feet touch a surface, looking a cat straight in the eyes, opening up a cats' mouth, without a gradual process to allow the cat to adapt will guarantee defensiveness from almost all cats and interfere with accurate temperament assessment.

They may be expedient, but domination techniques do not enhance cat behavior and instead usually cause cats to revert to their basic nature and go into survival mode. Natural feline reactions, such as cautious behavior, become intensified whenever a cat feels coerced, and this can mean hiding or defensive aggression.

Q. Okay, so how do you suggest handling the cat to get him out of the cage?

A. Assess the cat's overall posture and body language – don't take a chance with a cat who has his neck arched, ears back and fur on end. Use judgement with a shy cat who may hiss, spit or even growl. Walk by and observe the cat a few times without removing

him. Once you decide to remove the cat, you have to be quick about it. Approach with confidence and without hesitation. Don't offer your hand for the cat to smell, as you might with a cat in a home setting, or put your hand in and then draw back. Immediately touch and reposition the cat's hind quarters to the front of the holding cage, using distractions like feather toys, rattles or baby food on a spoon if necessary. Without petting the cat, remove him from the cage hind quarters first (cat facing away from you), grasping his front legs with one hand and supporting his torso and hind legs with your other hand. Handle the cat firmly, turning him away from any other cats and putting all four of his feet on a freestanding table surface (not a counter top) in the room. Face him away from you, allowing him to observe the space. Talk softly, sweetly and gently the whole time you work with him for reassurance. Once he's on the table, touch the cat with gentle strokes on his shoulders, side of head and neck, using minimal hand control. Lightly finger brush the side of his mouth to allow him to sense you. Avoid holding the cat around his middle, as he can easily turn and bite. With one hand on his shoulder blades to sense head movement, gradually massage the cat's body until he becomes less tense.

As a stranger, absolutely avoid direct eye contact —this is perceived as confrontation by a cat. Avoid hugging, clutching, putting your face too close – this is considered to be constraint by a cat. Also be sensitive to overstimulation through too much petting.

Q. Do these techniques work only on docile cats?

A. Not at all. I frequently give handling demonstrations at shelters and purposefully ask the staff to pick cats that either hiss and spit when you approach or are terrified and cowering at the back of the cage. I haven't had one of these cats yet that I couldn't handle, nor one that didn't calm down and actually respond with these handling techniques.

At a recent visit to a shelter in Massachusetts, staff showed me a cat before my first demonstration that was actually attempting to bite when I put my hand in her cage. This cat was considered unsociable, had not been vet examined and was scheduled for euthanasia. By the time I gave my second demonstration a few hours later, she was calmer –growling, but not biting. I was not only able to remove her and handle her all over using these techniques, I gave her a wet-hand mousse shampoo, combed her coat, and clipped all her claws. As a result, she was taken off the euthanasia list.

Q. Let's move on to some assessment methods. What do you think of strategies like rubbing the cat's tummy to test reaction?

A. In my experience, a stranger rubbing the belly of a cat in unfamiliar surroundings is almost guaranteed to provoke even a very social cat . Cats consider their undersides to be very vulnerable to attack and only enjoy being touched in this way by trusted people. Most will try to bite or look as if they want to. Hence this kind of “testing” predictably

brings out negative characteristics in most cats (other than the most docile or depressed). Another sensitive area can be the spot on the back near the base of the cat's tail.

Another "test" I don't agree with is placing a cat face-to-face with a strange cat in a cage to see how the cat reacts to other cats. In my experience, even the most social outgoing cat, if he has high intelligence or normal cat reactions, will hiss and screech if placed this close to another cat, especially if that other cat is an unaltered tom cat or if he is being constrained by a handler. Almost all cats need gradual exposure to everything. They like to view other cats from afar or at least have an escape route. A strong reaction using this technique would not be any indication that a cat would not get along with other cats if properly introduced.

I've also seen people approach a cat in a cage with a fake hand or arm to see what the response will be. A rubber hand with fingers may look "real" to humans, but cats rely more on smell than vision. The cat will likely bat or bite the probe, thinking of it as a threatening object and not as a hand. This should not be taken as an indication of aggressive temperament.

Q. How about some general tips for handling shelter cats?

A. Again, avoid direct eye contact – cats associate staring with the beginning of conflict . Use minimal force and reassuring hand contact to put the cat at ease. To a cat, cuddling by a stranger is simply another form of restraint.

Between handling cats, always clean surfaces and hands with disinfectant that includes an odor neutralizer. This removes the smell of other cats and disarms the cat's ability to discern danger. Keep the cat away from clothes that may smell of the previous cat. Remember that some cats react negatively to perfume.

Use distractions—things like feathers, rattles or baby food. A cat at ease will want to play on the table. Although many will be too fearful to respond, even a small indication of interest gives a hint of the cat's "real" personality. Not all cats are familiar with baby food, but the strong smell will often divert the cat's attention and help associate handling with the pleasure of this treat.

To enhance social response, keep handling sessions short and pleasant - food treats, teasers and toys will be remembered. The next time the cat is approached, he will be more ready to come out for a handling, combing, or play session.

Cats like routine, so try and schedule sessions at a certain time of day so as to build anticipation.

Being removed from a cage can be stressful at first. Likewise, a wet-hand grooming, claw clipping, or combing may seem strange to a cat not used to such treatment. Repetitive exposure to potentially uncomfortable situations that pose no actual threat helps a cat

become bolder. For starters, clip only one or two claws or just comb under the chin and chest. As the cat begins to cope, his confidence builds, his overall fearfulness diminishes and his natural cat show-off tendencies may begin.

No biting, scratching or lashing out should be allowed – make a “hurt” noise and end the play/petting session. Cats should be rewarded for gentleness and learn not to harm humans. They should also learn that handling/stroking is not meant to be threatening, but pleasurable.

Be careful of catnip, since it can be too stimulating for some cats or cause unpredictable aggressive reactions in intact cats under stress.

If a cat shows signs of fearfulness during handling, don’t reinforce such behavior by babying or giving the “poor thing” message. Cats will cautiously test and, based on this reaction, assume there really is danger/something to be afraid of. In effect, the cat will conclude he is being rewarded/praised for his ability to sense danger, deducing that it is appropriate to be nervous when handled.

Keep a progress chart or notes – even if the cat shows signs of fear and is hiding, ANY progress is an indication that eventually there will be success.

Q. How can enhanced shelter handling help cats be on their best behavior for a potential adopter?

With regular enhanced handling, a cat begins to expect pleasure upon removal from his cage – this reduces fearfulness, which works against the cat’s adoption.

Appearance is a big attraction to cat lovers and can make a tremendous difference in speeding the cat’s adoption. Wet hand grooming removes dull dead shedding hair and adds gloss to the coat. Combing adds glamour to a longhaired cat.

To introduce a caged cat to a potential adopter, remove the cat properly. Then take the cat, with a towel or something familiar, to the “get acquainted” area. This room or walk-in run should be very close by and contain a small table, a cat tree or another platform surface. (Many introduction rooms have only a chair, and the cat immediately runs around the room and hides underneath it.) If the area is where the cat is used to having handling sessions, it’s a bonus.

It is always ideal to interact with a cat approximately at eye level so that he feels secure enough to be curious. Most cats are reluctant to sit in the lap of a stranger but may approach in other friendly ways if given the chance. Visitors should always use disinfectant/odor control before handling cats.

Q. What do you think about the trend toward multi-cat housing (large communal cat

rooms) in shelters?

A. There is no question that cats in communal rooms appear to be much more social and comfortable than they are in cages. They benefit from variety, space to move and scratch, opportunity to interact with other cats, and cubby boxes for hiding or sleep. In addition, cats are always more at ease and outgoing with strangers when meeting in their own territory rather than in a strange “get acquainted” room.

Design and materials are important – a security alcove is a must, and natural light and good air exchange are necessary -- but the overall cost of communal housing may not be more than using expensive stainless steel caging for the same number of cats.

To protect the health of the cats, newcomers must first be quarantined to make sure they are not shedding viruses and that they are free from other health problems prior to introduction. All cats must be sterilized.

An adjoining holding area or cat carriers must be present to allow for good, regular cleaning.

Communal cat housing works best for shelters with the ability to hold cats for considerable time and with a staff or volunteers dedicated to working with cat introductions. Introduction of new cats to the communal environment must be done gradually and with skill to avoid too much stress.

Reports from shelters indicate that cheery, cozy communal rooms increase adoption rates and create a positive image of the shelter as a caring, pleasant place.

Q. How would you go about selecting roommates, cats with compatible personalities? Is there an optimum number of cats to have in one room?

A. Overcrowding will cause anxiety reactions in the cats. In my experience, ten or twelve cats in one space, no matter how big, is probably the maximum for comfort. A small room with three or four cats is workable. It's probably better to keep the cats in the same grouping rather than have continuous introductions. When all the cats in the group are adopted, another group can move in.

Some cats will simply not get along with others, so traditional cage housing or walk-in condos will always be needed in any shelter. A combination of cages within a communal play area can work, with compatible cats rotating throughout.

Consideration should be given to the age of cats – older cats may not welcome rambunctious kittens. Even neutered males can be territorial or competitive with other males. It will often be easier to introduce males to females, or very young males or older females to older males.

Q. You mentioned that you give cat handling demonstrations at shelters. How would someone go about enlisting your services?

A. I travel two or three times a month to various parts of the country either to judge a cat show or to attend meetings. With plenty of advance notice, I can sometimes tack on an extra day to visit a nearby shelter.

Q. Just out of curiosity, what is the worst handling experience you've ever had—either at a show or at a shelter—and how did you overcome it?

A. I have not yet had a bad handling experience at a shelter. I did, however, recently have a handling experience at the large CFA cat show at Madison Square Garden. As 150 people sat listening to my talk on the origins of the domestic cat and pedigreed breeds, I picked up a long feather to play with a very happy cat. He must have thought it was a snake or other creature and suddenly became fixated. The hair on his back and tail went bushy, his ears went back, and he cocked his head to one side—all classic signs of impending misdirected aggression. He turned toward me, “freaked out,” and tried to run away, wildly thrashing on the table as I focused on keeping him there. Knowing the size of Madison Square Garden, I simply could not let this cat get away or he might be lost forever. I kept talking to him calmly, directing his head toward the audience, and keeping up with his movements on the table, but I did not try to grasp him or use force – it was more like juggling. The audience held their breath. Finally, when he seemed to be under control, I let him lie quietly on the table and take some time to readjust while I calmly talked to him. I then quickly put him back into the holding cage followed by applause, relief and first aid for a few minor scratches. In a short time he was back to his easy going self, and I was ready to go on to the next cat.