

Socializing a Feral Cat

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Shortened List of Tips – Please read the article for more detailed descriptions

- 1 Think like a Feral Cat. Allow her to be scared. Reset your clock to her needs.
- 2 First things first – a trip to the vet. Have your vet check for worms and parasites (fleas and ticks), test for FeLV and FIV, ringworm and lice. Spay or neuter as soon as possible.
- 3 Prepare your home: a dark room that is fully cat-proofed, with hiding places, food, water, toys, two litterboxes filled with organic-only potting soil, and articles of your clothing bearing your scent and placed in appropriate places around the room.
- 4 Release her into the prepared room and leave her alone for 24 hours.
- 5 Be prepared for the worst when you go in the room. Wear long sleeves, long pants, gloves, shoes, and bring along a piece of cardboard for a shield in case she attacks out of fear.
- 6 Work on building trust. Food = trust. Feed her on a regular schedule and stay in the room while she eats.
- 7 Don't force contact with her. Petting is a threat; let her come to you when she is ready.
- 8 Avoid direct eye contact with her. Eye contact is aggressive to a feral.
- 9 Initiate play with a fishing pole type toy. Never play using your hands as the object of attack.
- 10 Be prepared for two steps forward, five steps back. It takes a while and a lot of testing on her part for her to truly trust you.
- 11 Pay attention to her body language. When she says, "That's enough," back off. This reinforces her trust.
- 12 Don't have expectations of this cat. Let her show you who she is, accept her quirks and limits, and you will have a friend for life.

So you've decided to give a feral cat a forever home. The good news is that this cat will show you a loyalty like none you have ever known before. You will develop a bond that is nothing short of amazing, but this bond will only happen over time, coupled with patience, a whole lot of work, and love. Feral cats survive by instinct, and that instinct includes not trusting people. They avoid them at all costs, with the possible exception of the person who brings them food. Even that is a precarious relationship at best. You are asking this cat to completely change her way of reacting to people. (I use the pronoun "she" for simplification purposes and consistency. Of course, socializing male ferals can be done following the same steps and suggestions presented here.) Socializing a feral cat doesn't occur overnight, and it takes a full commitment on your part along with changing your way of thinking about cats in general to make it work. It can be done, however, regardless of the cat's age or what some authors have said on the subject.

First Things First – Change Your Way of Thinking

The first thing you must do, before you even have the cat in your home, is change your way of thinking. This isn't a lap cat by any stretch of the imagination, and may never become one (or she may become the biggest snuggle-bug you've ever known!). You must go by her time frame, and this changes for every cat. You may socialize and love these ferals, but you must learn to reset your internal kitty clock. Stop thinking of this kitty as a lap kitty or purr bug who wants to lap milk from your hand. Approach her on her terms, working with her slowly once she is captured. You need to allow for her to be afraid, you can't lose your patience with her, and you can't rush her to "conform" to your expectations. If you can do all that, then you have what it takes to help this cat. You have a feral point of view.

She doesn't want to be touched at this point, and will probably view any attempts at petting as a threat. You are a predator to her, pure and simple. She views herself as your potential prey. She may have had bad experiences with people before you, from all-out abuse to being shot at or rocks thrown at her while she was just trying to find food. Even if she never had these experiences, a true feral has been taught from birth to distrust you. It's not easy to overcome everything Mother has taught.

The First Vet Visit

Trapping her will be traumatic for her, but cover the cage with a dark cloth to help her feel safe. When you trap kitty, the first trip should be to the vet, but call your vet first and inform them you are bringing in a feral cat for an "emergency check up." Ask for an open appointment time on a specific date. Tell them if you can't trap her, you will call and reschedule as soon as possible. This way you, and especially your other pets, have no contact with the kitty before she's been checked out, had her shots, etc. If there's any way you can manage to trap the cat in the morning, that's even better. If she's not sick or compromised health-wise, ask that she be spayed (neutered for a male) that same day.

Spay/Neuter is important for many reasons, but here are a few pertaining especially to bringing a feral inside. First, do you want to deal with a cat in heat or a spraying male? I don't think you do. Although it can take a couple of weeks for a male's hormones to re-adjust after neutering, he will be much less likely to spray to mark his new territory once he is neutered. Your cat, too, is going to crave the wide open spaces she is used to. Being in heat makes that craving unbearable for her, and the decibel level of your home will rise, even soar, several notches. Of course, the best reason of all is that you will have a happier, healthier cat and if she does ever get out, you won't be adding to the overpopulation problem. But if you are willing to take in a feral cat, willing to give her the love and care she needs, you already know all this.

Be sure to have her checked for FeLV (Feline Leukemia), FIV (Feline AIDS) and FIP (Feline Infectious Peritonitis). Also have the vet run stool cultures, rule out ringworm, and look for lice. Be sure to check for worms, fleas, ticks and other parasites. Most outside cats, stray or feral, have worms. In order to minimize stress levels, as well as not spread any parasites, bacterial or viral illnesses to your resident animals, your kitty should have her own two litterboxes in a completely separate area. Regardless of how the socialization with you goes, she should not be introduced to any resident pets until, at the very least, there is no evidence of any parasites or illnesses, and the vet clears her.

Worms are a problem with feral cats, and can be very difficult to get rid of. Even if there is no evidence of worms to begin with, if the vet agrees she is old enough to handle the toxin, get her de-wormed. With a bad infestation (which many feral cats have), the eggs in the system can gestate even after the medicine was given, and some worms may not be killed. In these cases, and especially with multiple cats, it can take months to fully rid them of the worms. It also may take different types of medication, as the eggs in the system can become tolerant of certain poisons. If you are dealing with worms, be sure to scoop the litterbox often and clean the litterbox with bleach to get rid of worms and eggs in the stools. Be sure you get the de-worming meds from your vet, as the over-the-counter meds only expel the worms from a cat's system, not actually killing the worms, which makes re-infestation extremely likely. Remember, the de-worming med is a poison, so kitty may act a bit off while on the meds. This is normal, but keep a close eye on her for any serious adverse reactions.

Fleas are another problem for ferals, and again be sure you see your vet for the medication. Do not use over-the-counter flea treatments, as some of these "treatments" have been reported to react badly with some cats, causing seizures, neurological effects, and even death. Is that really worth saving a few dollars? Even without those risks, the prescription treatments do a much better job killing all the fleas and eggs, so the fleas aren't back in a few weeks. With a heavy flea infestation, you risk your cat becoming anemic, so ask your vet to run a chem. panel. If you bring

in a very small kitten with a flea problem, comb out the fleas with a flea comb and discuss any medications with your vet. Small kittens do not have the proper antibodies from their mothers to handle the poisons; their immune systems are most likely down due to the fleas and other conditions, and they could easily catch a chill and die if bathed. Never use flea treatments formulated for dogs, as these are extremely toxic to cats. If kitty has been inside your home, you also will need to rid your home of the fleas. Wash all bedding or towels from the room kitty was in. The soap and water should kill the fleas but, just to be sure, dry them on high heat. Flea collars are useless on cats, but they are helpful in your cleaning. Take a new flea collar, cut it into pieces and put it in your vacuum cleaner bag. Then thoroughly vacuum the room and surrounding rooms. The flea collar will kill the fleas once they are vacuumed up but, again just to be sure, take out the vacuum bag to the trash immediately.

Ticks can be a real problem. If your feral has ticks, let the vet and his staff care for the cat in a professional fashion, as ticks can quickly sap the life out of any kitten or cat. Don't just pull ticks out with tweezers. This generally only pulls the body off, leaving the head inside the skin, which can lead to extremely nasty infections and other problems. If you must get them off yourself, get a pair of tweezers, a bottle of rubbing alcohol, some q-tips, and a small jar. Pour some rubbing alcohol into the jar, set it aside, then take a q-tip, dip it in the alcohol and place directly on the tick. The tick will become agitated and raise its head out of the kitten. Once it does, grasp the tick gently with the tweezers and stick it in the jar of alcohol. If your kitten has a lot of ticks, it is especially important she see a vet immediately. As previously mentioned, ticks can draw a lot of blood out of a kitten or cat, and your kitten could be highly anemic now and in great danger. Ticks also like to burrow down into the ears of feral kitties; they crawl in when the cats are asleep. Your vet needs to remove those quickly as well.

When the tests come back for FeLV, FIV, and FIP, and if there is a positive result, discuss your options with your vet. These diseases are NOT necessarily a death sentence! When there is a positive test result for any of these, ask for a second test to be done if possible. Some of the initial tests only test if the cat has been exposed to the virus, which does not necessarily mean that a cat has the disease. Many cats with FeLV and FIV in particular live long and happy lives, even in multi-cat households. FIP may be the exception, especially if kitty has the "wet form" of this disease. It is a horrible and almost always fatal disease. Again, discuss your options with your vet to determine what is right in your situation.

Preparing Kitty's New Home

If kitty wasn't an expected arrival, this preparation can be done while she is at the vet's office getting spayed (or neutered).

Be prepared before you bring this scared ball of claws and teeth into your home! She will need her own room, away from any resident pets or children. It should be fairly quiet (NO loud noises!), a dark room that is fully cat-proofed with a few hiding spots she can flee to when she feels threatened. You will need all the basic kitty supplies plus a few additional things to make the adjustment period as pleasant as possible for kitty: food and water bowls, two litterboxes with litter and some organic-only potting soil (if she's coming directly from outside), toys, a radio, and a comfy place for you to spend time with her. Get a loud tick-tock wind-up clock, and wrap it in a towel, and put it with your sweatshirts for a snugly place to sleep (especially good for kittens).

You can provide her with hiding places of your choice and making, although she may find better ones. Take a big cardboard box, flip it upside down and cut a couple holes in different sides big enough for her to pass through. Weight down the top so it doesn't move with her, and put some nice soft blankets inside for her. Also put a smelly sock or shirt or some other object with your scent on it so the cat will get used to your particular human smell.

The litterboxes are another issue where it pays to think ahead. At first, use straight organic potting soil with no litter. This will be more familiar to her, since she is used to going in dirt. Over

time, mix in the litter until all you have is straight litter-filled litter pans. Don't use clumping litter just yet – that is way too foreign and she won't know what to do with it. Unless they are really scared or sick, ferals are generally fastidious about using a litterbox. It's part of their natural defenses to cover their waste so predators can't easily find them. If she is truly feral, don't be surprised if she hunkers down in the litterbox for a while. The soil reminds her of home and comforts her. She will figure out what it is really used for eventually.

Be sure to cat-proof this room really well. One of a cat's most effective defensive tools is the ability to hide. You will be amazed at how small she can make herself, what tiny holes and cracks she will be able to get herself into to hide from you. The last thing you need is to have to chase this cat out of an unsafe hiding spot or, worse yet, from inside your ductwork or walls. Get down on your belly and look everywhere in the room for anything that may be unsafe. Remember, cats don't have shoulder blades like we do – if they can get their heads in it, they can get the rest of their bodies in it, too. Be sure to check vertical spaces as well.

Her first reaction to being let out of the trap/cage/carrier may be to RUN and escape. They can and do scale walls when they are panicked. Check any and all shelves and make sure there isn't anything she can knock off and break. Check that there are soft landing pads around these areas too. At some point of her confinement, she WILL try to escape (whether you see it or not). If you want to have fresh air flowing through an open window, buy some decorative trellis material at a hardware store and cut it to fit the window so she can't push out or rip through the screen.

Ferals love string--string reminds them of mouse tails--and they loooove mouse tails! While this makes choosing toys they like easier, it also poses a danger to them. They love to EAT string. String can get tangled up in their digestive systems and require surgery to remove it. If it isn't removed, it can cause a blockage, or cut through the intestine and cause peritonitis, and in some cases death. When cat-proofing, be sure to pay attention to taking away any string they might get at, and put away those wonderful toys on a string when they aren't in use.

The First Days

OK, so the room is ready, and everything she needs is there for her. You're ready for her arrival at her new home. Bring her into the room in the carrier, close the door behind you and open the door of the carrier. Step away from the carrier and let her come out on her own accord. One of two things will happen: she will bolt out of there and find a place to hide (or scale the walls looking for a way out), or she will be too scared with you still in the room to move. If she does come out, don't go after her and--whatever you do--**do not try to catch her**. Just watch to see where she goes. Now leave her alone for at least 24 hours. It's hard to do, but unless it sounds like she could be hurting herself don't go in there. She needs to adjust to her surroundings. As long as you provided plenty of food, water, two litterboxes, and cat-proofed the room really well, she will be fine. She may yowl, although most of the time ferals will be too scared and shocked to yowl that first day. After that, earplugs may be a good investment.

Leave a nightlight on for her, but not a large overhead light. The relative darkness will give her a sense of security. She knows instinctively that she can see better in the dark than most animals, humans included. Put a classical CD on repeat play at a low volume. Ferals especially respond very well to classical music, especially harp music if you have it. It is very calming to them.

Once you start going into the room, do it at regularly scheduled times. Knock at the door – not too loudly – to announce your arrival. This will do two things: it will probably spook her enough so she doesn't bolt for the door, and it starts setting a routine she can count on. Cats like routine. At first, always bring food with you. She needs to associate you with good things, and for a feral that is used to scrounging, food is a very good thing. Scoop her litterboxes, feed her, bring her fresh water. Talk to her quietly with a calm, soothing voice when you are doing these things so she gets used to hearing you. At this point, do not seek her out. You are still very scary, but she is noticing everything you do in her room.

When you go into her room, always remember that you are still dealing with a wild animal, and you are the enemy. She is truly wild, and truly scared, she will try everything to get out of this confinement. Since you seem to be the gatekeeper to her confinement that means defeating you. Even kittens will put up a fierce fight if they feel threatened. You need to come prepared for her if she decides to launch an attack at your face, and some really do this. Cat scratches and bites are serious business and can land you in the hospital. "Cat Scratch Fever" isn't just a song by Ted Nugent, it is a serious medical condition. Be prepared, and realize *it is not personal*. Wear long sleeves, extra layers of clothing, long pants, shoes, heavy leather gloves (welding gloves are good), and bring a flat piece of cardboard to use as a shield. If she launches at you, raise the cardboard so she bounces off something fairly soft instead of your arm or face, possibly inflicting injuries onto both of you. Mind you, most of the time ferals won't react this way but you don't know her history. If she's been through abuse and feels she is trapped in a fight-or-die situation, she will fight. She doesn't know that *you* aren't the same thing that hurt her before. You may feel silly that first time you see her and all she does is turn tail or meekly meow, but it is better to be prepared for the worst and hope for the best.

Building Trust

In essence, socializing a feral cat is no more than building back up a trust that has been lost or never known. The first step of proving that you are a reliable source of food has been taken--and noted--in the cat's mind. That's not enough to really get through to this cat that you are *worthy* of her trust. This is the part that takes all that patience and hard work mentioned before. This part of the process can take weeks or even months to work through. It all depends on the cat, what experiences she's had with humans, how old she is, how ingrained those survival instincts are in her.

Once you've established your basic routine with her--what times she will get her food--start spending more and more time in the room with her at those times. Read, bring in a laptop and work quietly, write, watch TV on low volume, just be in there with her. Try to be on her level as much as possible by sitting or laying on the floor or on a low chair. You look really, really big to her when you are standing up. Try to see things from a scared kitty's perspective, and then adjust yourself so you aren't so scary. The most important thing is just to be there with her. Reading out loud is one of the best things you can do, because she will get used to you and your voice. The more she sees that you are there and aren't threatening her, the more trusting she will become.

Once she's comfortable enough to come out of hiding with you in the room, reinforce that you are associated with good things. Leave treats out for her (not in your hand just yet, but close to you). Entice her to play with a fishing pole type toy so your hands aren't too close. Cats are very smart and it won't take her long to figure out that you are the force behind the toy.

When she comes out, as much as you want to look her in her eyes, do not make eye contact. Look over the top of her so she will not consider you a threat and avoid looking her directly in the eye. Try to look just over her ears, and she won't feel threatened. In the feral cat world, direct eye contact is considered an act of aggression. Especially in the beginning, when she's feeling you out, avoid looking at her at all. This will reinforce to her that you are not a predator watching her every move and waiting for her to show a weakness.

Don't extend your hand to her right off. When she comes out eventually while you are sitting on the floor, slowly place your hand on the floor palm flat, not near her but so she can see it. As much as you are itching to pet her, don't. Let her make that first move toward you either by bumping your leg, arm or hand. This is where the patience of a saint comes in. This is the step that can take a very long time. Remember, she has had her entire world flipped upside down and is captive for the first time in her life. She is not going to trust you yet, figuring somewhere along

the way you are going to hurt her. For every bit of progress you see, she will test you again and again before making another step toward trusting you.

You will know when kitty's trust is growing. She will play, she will watch you with interest and not fear, she will come close and even touch and smell you. To get her ready for that first real petting, let her get used to your hand being close to her and moving toward her. Let her sniff you so she knows that this *thing* moving toward her is part of you.

When you think she is ready for the next step (when she has made moves to be close to and touch you), lay your hand down palm flat next to her gently. Place a toy near your hand – but not close enough to get scratched. She should come up to your hand and sniff it and nudge it. If she does, raise it very slowly (pretend you are in a slow motion film) Don't look into her eyes, but talk to her gently and when it is to her face level, leave it there then start petting her. I cannot tell you how you will know when to do this, just that you will know.

When you touch her for the first time she may be very receptive, like "What took you so long? I've been waiting for AGES!" But if you feel her tense up, stop and let her be. Pay close attention to her for signals that she's uncomfortable. If you see or sense that she isn't sure about it, just stop. Being attuned to her and stopping before she has to forcefully tell you to stop will prove again to her that you aren't a threat.

Through all of this, there may be sudden and seemingly inexplicable setbacks. This is typical behavior for a feral kitty. Two steps forward then five steps back. It is frustrating at times, actually more than frustrating. You cannot react on your emotions in front of her; you must just maintain the routine she is used to seeing. Keep it consistently the same whether she comes out or not. Cats do not like change; they like to change things on us though. Look at it as a test. The cat wants to see what type of emotion it will elicit, and then the cat will act accordingly. Working with a feral would be like working with an abused child. Just when you think you've gotten through, something in their brain kicks back to what they learned before and their experiences with adults. With patience and love she will see again that you only mean to love her. She'll come back around. Those old, ingrained habits of not trusting people are hard to get through.

When she starts getting into petting and love, pay attention to her body signals. Ferals are especially sensitive and can easily be over-stimulated. The nerves in her skin become so sensitive that the petting she loved just seconds ago becomes almost painful. She will tell you that it's too much in signals she thinks are clear as day, but can be more difficult for us humans to see. Watch for swishing tail, pupils becoming dilated, ears going back. When she gives off these signals, stop petting now. She may come back in a few seconds for more love, but she needs to calm herself down. If you don't stop, she will tell you in no uncertain terms that it was too much – she will scratch or bite.

Through this entire process she may give you mixed signals even in the same day. If she hisses, swats or bolts from you, don't take it personally. You may have startled her inadvertently and a hiss is just her way of saying that you invaded her space, or it was a knee-jerk reaction to being startled. When she reacts to you in this manner, look at whatever you just did that pushed her limits and learn from it. Sometimes for no discernible reason ferals take a few steps back in the trust factor. Whatever happens, never react to her in anger by yelling or hitting her. This will take you right back to the beginning, possibly never to gain any level of trust again. If you feel anger building to the point where you would react in a bad way to her, leave the room. It is advisable, however, that you don't leave immediately after she has struck out at you, whether by hissing, swatting or biting. You don't want to give her the idea that if she acts like that she can get rid of you. You want to end things as much as possible on a good note, even if that note is mutual ignoring.

No matter what happens here, just remember – you've just brought a wild animal into your home. She'll love you like no other, but it may take a while before she switches from survival mode, to

"this is my turf" mode, to "these are my people!" mode. Take heart in the little steps and the tiny amounts of progress that you two make day to day. No matter how many times you have done this, it is always a learning experience for both the cat and the person.

What to Expect From Your Feral Cat

Of course, most of this depends on the individual cat, but there are a few things you pretty much can count on with your feral cat. She will be skittish and distrustful of strangers all her life. She will hide whenever there are loud noises or sudden changes to your household. Cats in general don't like change, and this goes double for feral cats.

Food may be a constant issue with your feral cat. Those who have to survive on their own merits eat every meal as though it could be their last. Those old habits die hard. For some ferals, free feeding is the best option so they know that food is always available. Others can't handle this and will eat everything in sight, becoming obese. This is something to watch carefully, although most will learn in a short period of time that they don't have to eat everything in sight.

The other generality is that they tend to go to extremes. She will either try every time you open the door to get out, or she will show no interest at all in going outside. She will be aloof and only want love on her terms, or she will seem to want to make up for the time when she couldn't get attention and demand all the time. You may or may not get a lap cat, but that's true for all cats.

With ferals, the best thing to do is not expect anything from them. Let them show you who they are and what they want. Accept them for who they are, and they certainly will do the same for you.

If this is your first time (or fiftieth!) taking a feral cat into your home and your heart, we strongly suggest that you find a support group. These people who have been there can encourage you on those down days, give suggestions when you feel lost, and smile and cry with you when you make those leaps of progress. One such group of people can be found at www.TheCatSite.com in the [Caring for Strays and Ferals Forum](#). Joining is free, but the information and support you gain is invaluable.