



BALTIMORE HUMANE SOCIETY

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Base Camp- How to Prepare for your New Cat

Congratulations on giving a homeless animal a new life in your home! You can bet on one thing; the cat you just adopted is in the midst of having her world turned upside down. Routine is a vital aspect of cat life; it's key in how cats define territory. Things must look the same, smell the same, and so on in order for confidence in the territory to remain high. Now imagine the life your new companion was leading before he came to live with you. It makes no difference whether we are talking about a 7-year-old cat you adopted from the shelter or rescued from the street, or a 6-week-old kitten from a box in front of a supermarket. This cat's sense of "stable-sameness" has been torn up by the roots. Knowing this (even if you know very little else about your new cat's history), there is a very simple way of acclimating your cat to your home.

You may not have time to plan ahead, since new feline additions tend to occur on the spur of the moment, but if you can give the cat an immediate sense of belonging to a space that is already set up, it will make him feel more secure. What does "set up" mean? Let's start with the essentials:

- Litterbox
- Litter (if you know the previous home, make sure to keep the litter type consistent)
- Dishes (glass or ceramic work best for both food and water; no plastic or steel)
- Scratching surface—a condo/post combination would be a great start to get your cat's scent thoroughly on a piece of furniture; but at least provide an inexpensive cardboard scratcher to begin with.
- Assortment of toys— but "just say no" to catnip if introducing a kitten!
- If you are adding a kitten to your home, please read our library article "Before You Get A Kitten" about kitten-proofing your base camp.

Now that you have the "what," let's focus on the "where." If you are introducing an only cat to the home who is not a kitten (over 1 year old), your bedroom is an ideal base camp, because it will inevitably become the core of your cat's territory. Your bedroom is where your scent is the strongest in the house, and this will give your feline friend a sense of belonging with the new social group. However, if you have an aversion to having base camp in your bedroom, what with the litterbox and all, that's okay. Another room will work. Remember, however, that base camp is a temporary situation—the litterbox, condo, dishes and toys will all eventually be distributed throughout your home. In any case, if you choose another room, make sure it's not in the basement or unused part of the house. You do want a space where your cat's highly refined senses can pick up the normal household activities that he will eventually be immersed in. This is, after all, a process of desensitization, of gradually getting them used to the territory.

If your new arrival is a kitten, or if you are introducing a new cat to another pet, the bathroom is a great place to start. For kittens, it provides safety. There is the least amount of wires to chew on or get tangled in, sharp corners to injure, and small places to get stuck in (but don't forget to keep the toilet lid down to prevent drowning). The smaller space will also comfort the smaller cat. The bathroom is also a more neutral site for the purposes of introducing one pet to another. It is also the only room in the house guaranteed to have a door—an important characteristic of the room!

Take all of the items listed above and make sure they are placed in every available corner of base camp. Food dish should have ample space away from water; both dishes should be located in the furthest area from the litterbox. If you can provide a condo, place it where the cat can get to a window. Scatter the toys around the room (although if we're lucky the cat will do that job for us very nicely, thank you!). If the room is not the bedroom, do make sure to provide articles of clothing, blankets, or towels, anything that carries your and your family's scent—to give the cat that immediate sense of belonging we discussed.

Spend as much time with the new cat as you can during the first crucial days of base camping. Among the toys, you should have at least one interactive toy (a toy in which you are attached to one end and the cat to the other), to play with while you spend quality time. This will set up a routine of play to dispel stress, which is the basis of play therapy (you can read more about this in our article library article, "Play Therapy—Every Day!"). Also, take this time to set up a trusting relationship. Talk to your cat. Don't necessarily try to pick him or even pet him, if he is acting fearful. Give it time.

Don't crowd the base camp with every family member either. Cats on edge have a heightened sense of their already keen fight/flight response. Give everyone a turn, but let all family members know that quality time can be playing, or simply sitting and reading the newspaper aloud in a soft voice. Be aware of the small things like how your legs might be blocking what the cat perceives as an "escape route." Make yourself as small as possible when sitting on the floor with the cat, especially in a cramped base camp like the bathroom.

It is not at all unusual for the new cat to seem extra-sensitive, fearful, agitated, or is just having a hard time adjusting. Flower essence formulas from Spirit Essences can be very helpful. We've actually developed a formula especially for the stress a newcomer experiences called "Changing Times." This remedy not only helps adjustment into the new home, but eases anxiety from being in a rescue or shelter environment, and even helps to release emotional baggage from past abuse.

Introducing your new cat to other resident pets is another step taken from the base camp that's discussed in another article, "Cat-to-Cat Introductions".

The final element, and most tricky, involving base camp, is de-camping. When is it time to let the cat out and about the rest of the territory with confidence? We can't tell you that. Only you will know when the cat is feeling strong enough to "spread her wings," so to speak. There's a fine line between territorially traumatizing a cat (especially one

that's been in and out of rescue situations), and allowing her to problem solve on her own. Some cats are ready overnight, some in a few days; some—because of their history—can take a week or two. The more you can listen to what she has to say in those first crucial hours in camp, the clearer the answer will be for both of you. When it is time, keep the transition slow. We know you want that litterbox out of your room. Plan where its final destination will be and move it literally just a few feet a day. An ounce of slow-going is worth a pound of peeing-on-the-carpet prevention. Take all of the key elements from camp and begin to spread them throughout the house—the condo in a sunny window in the living room, the blankets to a couch, the toys in different rooms. This will allow your cat to recognize these objects, already claimed as his or hers, and transfer them to a new area of the territory.

Most of all, take your time! You only have one chance at introducing your new companion to your home and your life. What's a few extra hours or days in the years you will spend together? Once again, congratulations and best wishes for a long and healthy relationship!

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