

ADOPTING A FERAL CAT- Your goal is to build a bond of trust and communication

Written by: Pam Johnson-Bennett – for the Whole Cat Journal

There's always enough room in your heart to take in another cat in need. The thought of a hungry cat, alone and scared, starts you thinking about turning the extra guest room into a little sanctuary. It's impossible to resist that dirty, skinny, precious four-legged shadow who peers at you from beneath the bushes.

Very often, the cat you take in is one who has been lost or abandoned. It may even be a stray who long ago left behind the memory of home and family. Even though this cat may be shy, fearful or defensive, with time, love and patience, it's usually able to reconnect with humans.

A feral cat, though, is one who has lived it's life in the wild. It's life consists of following the rules of survival. It has not been socialized and has never experienced human touch.

Domesticating a feral cat requires skill and patience, and if you want a lap cat many the times the result is unsuccessful. Sometimes though, the walls slowly come down, and the cat begins to trust you. If you are willing to bring the cat indoors and provide a safe home, and the cat will socialize itself without much help from you. Each has it's own personality.

Guiding you through the process of bonding with a feral cat in the space limitations of an article is difficult. Entire books are written on the subject because of its complexity. View this article as your basic introduction. If you're in a position of taking in a feral, learn all you can about these special cats.

I receive many phone calls from people who manage to capture a feral cat, get as far as having it checked by the vet, then bring her home to begin the bonding process. The question I hear most is: "Now what do I do."

If you rush into this process, the cat will never trust you. You could also end up injured. You must take each step slowly in order for you both to adjust. Always keep in mind that the cat is terrified and won't initially view your kindness as a positive thing.

Create a safe nest

Before bringing in the cat, create a "safe room" because the first thing on the cat's mind will be to find safety. The cat will look for a hiding place immediately, so set up your room with lots of hiding options. In working with my feral cat Bebe, I began by covering the floor with cheap rugs that I could easily launder just in case she eliminated on them. Next, because the room was unfurnished, I brought in a few pieces of old furniture. I put two lawn chairs side by side and draped a sheet over them so she could hide under the tent. I created additional hideaways by turning boxes upside down, cutting doorways in the sides and then placing them in various locations around the room. Bebe could then move around without feeling exposed.

Litter box placement

The litter box set-up you choose is of utmost importance when it comes to a feral cat. In her previous life, she had the entire outdoors from which to choose. You can't expect her to understand the purpose of a litter box in the corner. Select a large, open plastic container for a litter box. When working with a feral cat, I find traditional litter boxes too small, so I choose plastic storage containers instead. They're available at discount and home improvement stores and come in all shapes and sizes. Select a large, low-sided box to make it easy for the cat to understand the concept.

As for litter stick close to nature – no exotic or perfumed litter. Outdoors, the cats chose a substrate such as dirt or sand, so you'll want to replicate that when it comes to the indoor set-up. The soft unscented sand-like-litters work well with cats who are used to outdoor soil. If you find the cat doesn't like the litter, you may have to start with actual garden soil or sand and then gradually mix in small amounts of litter.

Interesting enough, when Bebe didn't accept the litter substrate, I remembered something I've previously noticed about her. When outdoors, she would eliminate in leaf piles or tall grass, so I grabbed a handful of leaves from outside and spread them in the litter box. Each day, I'll sprinkle in some litter, gradually decreasing the amount of leaves.

Litter box placement is crucial, so I suggest putting it along the far wall, opposite the entry door. That creates a wide visual field so the cat will feel she has adequate reaction time to hide in case the door opens while she is in the litter box.

To help Bebe feel less vulnerable when near the food bowl or litter box, I crated tunnels using the upside-down boxes. You can use soft-sided cat tunnels instead (available through many mail order catalogs). Bebe felt safe enough to walk to the litter box or food by using the tunnel system. Create hiding places and safe sleep areas. An empty room is the worst place for a cat as it will cause her to hunker down in a corner (or worse in the litter box) and tremble.

If you can afford a cat tree or even just a perch, set it up by the window. Many cats feel more secure when elevated so create some place for them to climb. Don't forget to put a sturdy scratching post in the room as well. You may not think that room lighting would matter very much, but actually it's an important aspect of this process that shouldn't be overlooked. Low lighting will help the cat feel more invisible which increases her comfort level. Use light sensor night-lights so the room will remain on the dark side, but will be light enough for you to see where the cat is when you open the door. This will prevent escape attempts. You can increase the lighting when the cat feels more secure.

Since scent plays such a vital role in a cat's existence, that can be used to your advantage. Place worn T-shirts or used towels around the room. This gives the cat time, in private, to become familiar with your scent. Add an article or two of clothing every few days to keep the scent strong. Feliway spray (Abbott Labs) is a behavior

modification product that contains analogues of feline facial pheromones. Lightly spray the corners of some of the boxes or furniture. The cat will recognize the pheromones as her own, which can have a calming effect and help her identify this as her nest. Feliway is available from your veterinarian or other sources.

I also found that Bach Flower Remedies a true blessing when it comes to working with a feral cat. I start with Rescue Remedy by putting four drops in the cat's water. Then, as her specific emotional state becomes more evident (i.e. aggressive, fearful or shy), I can pick one or two particular remedies to create a custom treatment bottle.

Beginning the relationship

Be prepared for the fact that the cat will view you with terror, confusion and even hostility for quite a while. Don't take it personally. This process takes time-does it ever take time! The key is to let the cat set the pace. If you make the approach, she'll view it as a hostile move and will react accordingly.

Once the vet has examined the cat, bring her (in a cage or carrier) into the safe room. Set the carrier down, unlatch the door, open it slightly and leave the room for the rest of the day. This will the cat time to check out it's surroundings, choose the best hiding spots, use the litter box (hopefully) and maybe even eat and drink.

The next day, quietly ease into the room with a little irresistibly good smelling food. With Bebe, I found that warming the moist cat food slightly brought out just enough enticing aromas. Place the food down, check things out while you're there, clean the liter box, refill water, etc., but don't approach the cat. You can talk to her though. In your most soothing voice, talk quietly as you go about your duties so she'll get used to the tone of your voice.

Depending upon how scared the cat is, after a couple of days, begin sitting in the room for short periods of time. By quietly sitting there, the cat can begin approaching you if she chooses. I would bring a book and sit in the corner and read. At first, Bebe would just watch me from inside the closet. After a few days, though, she began inching her way out and would eat the food I'd brought while I read. She'd keep a close eye on me, but we were making progress.

Gentle play sessions

After a week, I started bringing an interactive toy (with feather) in with me. The one I chose was The Kitty Tease (Galkie Co.) because the cloth toy on the end of the string was quiet and non-threatening. I enticed Bebe very gently with the toy. I used subtle movements so I wouldn't startle her. The stringed toy on such along pole allowed her to play at a safe distance from me. She could remain well within her comfort zone, keeping the experience positive. Without realizing it, as Bebe focused on the toy, she was starting to venture out from her hiding place.

Each day I conducted several of these low-intensity interactive play sessions, gradually moving the toy a little closer to me each time. At the end of each session, I was also leaving a food treat for Bebe (her reward for being a good hunter). I'd place these

treats on the carpet and at first, she'd wait until I left the room before eating, but soon she was brave enough to take it right away.

Then a breakthrough occurred. I place the treat right next to me and Bebe not only walked right over to it, she began sniffing me. She felt secure enough to put her front paws on my leg and sniff. When you reach this point, you must fight the urge to reach out and pet the cat. Remember the cat must set the pace. I wanted Bebe to know she could trust me.

If all goes well, the next stage will be to hold out your hand and let the cat sniff it. It's very difficult for a feral cat to accept physical contact, so just hold your hand still and don't attempt to pet. This phase takes the longest because although the cat may enjoy coming up to you, playing or even sniffing your fingers, she may go crazy if you try to pet. You can try putting a few treats in your hand and see if the cat accepts them. Don't do this, though, if you think there's the slightest chance she may bite. Bebe let me know it was alright to finally pet her when I extended my hand for her to sniff, and she rubbed up against it. I ever so gently stroked the back of her head one time. It took weeks to get to this point but because I let her lead the way, she responded positively.

Be very patient

It has taken two years of working with Bebe to get to the point we're at today. I can pet, medicate, brush and even hold her, but I choose my times very carefully. I watch her body language with a keen eye because her survival instincts take over at the slightest challenge. I've learned to read her. I know if I need to pick her up. I must never surprise her, and I must be quick and efficient. Although Bebe sleeps on my lap for hours, she tolerates the confinement of my arms for only minute.

I have made adjustments in my home to make sure each room has appropriate hiding places should Bebe feel the need. I've even had to make subtle changes in how I move around the house in order to afford her the most security. For instance, if I'm in a room and Bebe walks in – everything is fine – but if Bebe is in the room first and then I come in, she tends to feel trapped. So, I adjust by never standing at the entrance. I move to one side as soon as I enter the room so Bebe feels she has a clear path of escape. As soon as I do this, I notice that she visibly relaxes. The two years I have been working with Bebe have been incredibly rewarding. She has taught me so much about trust and communication – the two most important elements in any relationship.

Pat Johnson-Bennett has been a cat behaviorist for 20 years. She is the author of several books on the subject, including Think Like a Cat, which will be released next month. The Whole Cat Journal 2000.