

Bringing home an under socialized cat

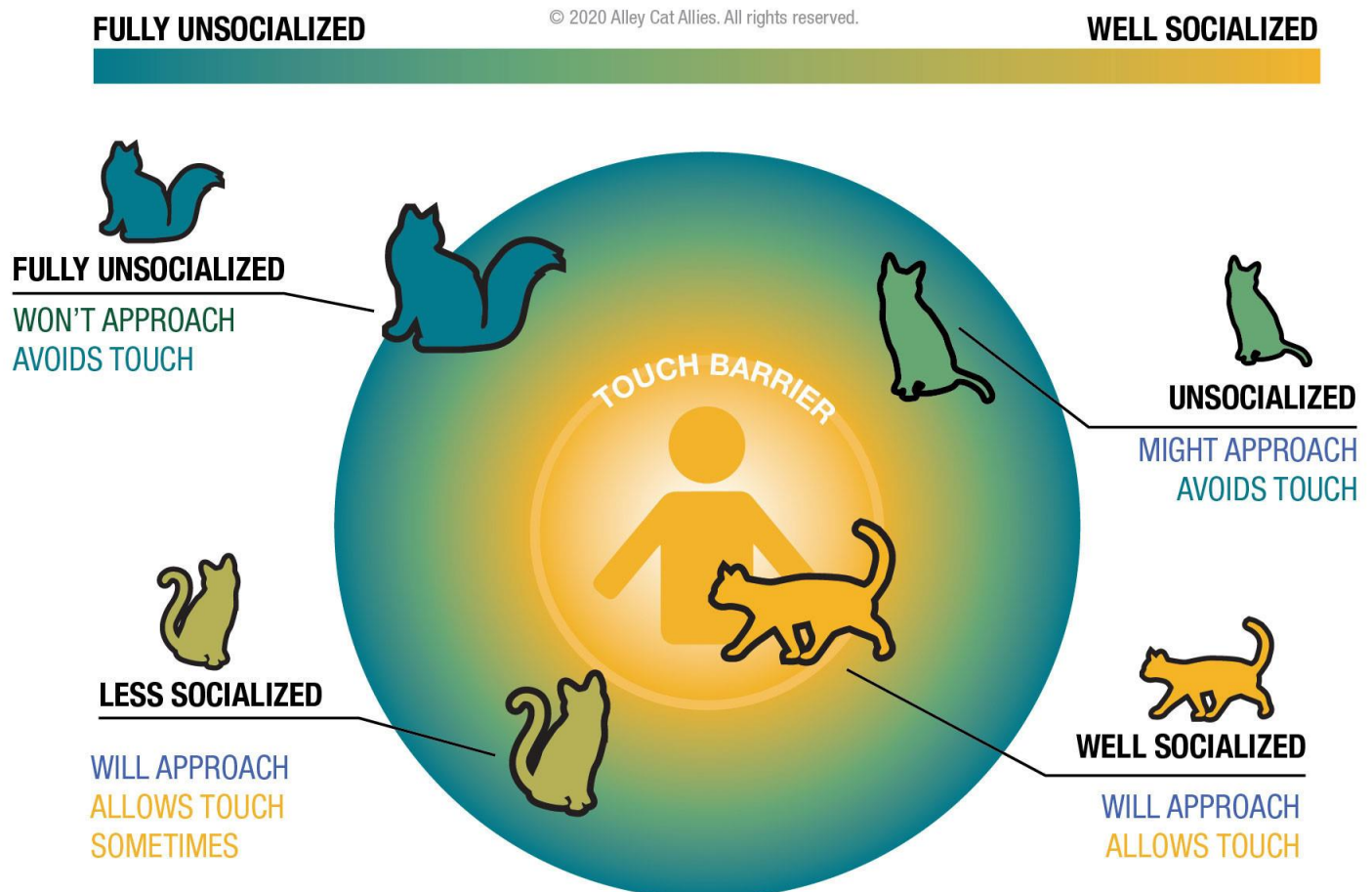


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Socialization is the process of acclimating a cat to the sights, smells, sounds and rhythms of living with humans. During socialization cats also develop social bonds and learn to trust the humans they live with. The prime socialization window for cats is birth to seven weeks. If a kitten doesn't have a positive experience with a human in that time frame, they'll see humans as potential predators. Outside of that seven week window, socialization can still occur but it will take longer. For an under socialized adult cat the socialization process could take a year or more.

When most people hear a cat is "under socialized" they immediately picture an aggressive feral cat who runs from humans or tries to bite. Socialization is not a yes or no thing. Socialization occurs on a continuum. There are a whole range of options between lap cat and an outdoor cat who avoids people.

If you're interested in more information on this, *The Cat Socialization Continuum: A Guide to Interactions Between Cats and Humans*, from Alley Cat Allies is an excellent source of information. (<https://www.alleycat.org/resources/cat-socialization-continuum-guide/>) The guide rates cat socialization levels according to the cat's response to the touch barrier and expands on the graphic below.



Lack of socialization can lead to a whole variety of different behaviors so knowing you adopted an under socialized cat doesn't tell you much about where the cats lack of socialization lies. Shelters are not a natural environment for cats so while shelter staff will have learned a bit about where a specific cats lack of socialization lies, unless that cat has spent time in a foster home, there are a lot of unknowns. Those will be revealed in your home as the cat encounters new aspects of living with humans.

Good general things to be aware of:

1. Instinct is a stronger force in under socialized cats.

Socialization gives cats more choices. An under socialized cats instinctive response to an unfamiliar sound in a home may be to hiss, growl and look to defend itself. A cat who is well socialized may react to an unfamiliar noise with caution but not alarm because the cat trusts it's home environment and the people living there.

2. On the food chain cats are mesopredators so they are both predator and prey. As a prey species, a cat's sense of safety depends on knowing every place to hide and every exit in their environment. So new environments are frightening for most cats, even if they are well socialized.

What cats experience in this situation is a survival level fear akin to what happens in your body a few seconds after your brain realizes you're about to have a car accident and there's nothing you can do about it.

You will create a much stronger trust bond with your cat if you provide encouragement and enticement to move past their fear than you will with force. Allowing your cat to explore at their own pace, come out of hiding spots as they are ready, etc. will help your cat build confidence and trust you.

3. When cats experience a survival level of fear, well socialized and unsocialized cats can behave exactly the same way.

Socialization Tips:

Providing adequate hiding spots is essential. Initially you'll need to go to the cat. Things like ear position and how dilated your cats eyes are will let you know if you're too close. If your cat hisses or growls, back up.

Simply sitting with your cat and talking to them is one of the most powerful tools you have. What you say to your cat matters less than your tone of voice and how calm you are.

Don't underestimate the power of gifting. Bringing your cat little gifts of a feather, treats or some other kind of toy can go a long way in creating a friendship. The gifting also creates an association for your cat that when humans show up, good things happen.

Depending on how frightened your cat is, they may ignore your gifts completely or choose to interact when you're not around for a day, a week, or even a couple weeks. The first indication your cat is getting more comfortable in your presence may be them choosing to eat a treat in front of you.