

The AVA Guide for Foster Parents

Thank you for becoming an AVA Foster Parent! By fostering a cat, you have saved the life of a vulnerable animal.

A rescue cat is a unique type of feline. It has experienced some rough times in its life and some have seen the worst of humanity. Some are abandoned family pets while others are born on the streets. The fortunate ones get rescued by organizations such as AVA, cared for in a foster home such as yours, and put up for adoption to find their permanent loving guardians.

The information provided here is designed to help you prepare your home for your feline house guests. One important fact to remember about rescue cats is that it could take some time for it to learn to trust humans again. The following topics are covered:

- 🐾 **Your Foster Cat's Basic Needs:** Safe Room, Food, Litter Box & Supplies
- 🐾 **Cat Proofing Your Home: The Safety Checklist**
- 🐾 **Feline Behaviour**
- 🐾 **Handling & Grooming**
- 🐾 **Scratching**
- 🐾 **Inappropriate Elimination: Going Outside the Box**
- 🐾 **Socialization:** New People, Environments & Noises
- 🐾 **Working with Shy & Under Social Cats**
- 🐾 **Children & Foster Cats**
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- 🐾 **Signs Your Foster Cat May Be Sick**



Action Volunteers for Animals (AVA) is an all-volunteer-run charitable animal rescue dedicated to helping stray and feral animals live healthy and happy lives.

Your Foster Cat's Basic Needs

Safe Room/Sanctuary Room

Your foster cat(s)/kittens will need its own space, which is usually a spare bedroom, a den or an extra bathroom where you can keep the cat(s) safe and comfortable. This is necessary in order to provide a place of security for your new cat so that it can adjust to its new surroundings that include you, your family members and possibly/eventually your pets.

It is highly recommended that you keep the new cat isolated from any resident pets and in this safe room. See the [AVA Foster Policy](#) for information on integrating foster cats with resident pets.

Set up the safe room with a large-enough litter box, a comfy, cozy place to sleep, water and food dishes, toys and hopefully a window for your cat to look out. Leave the cat carrier in the room and either remove the door or prop it open for the cat to use. You will need to cat-proof this room.

It is important to block off any “bad hiding” spots, such as under a bed, dresser, or any small space that is dangerous for a cat or kitten to be. Hiding reinforces fear in timid cats, so a healthy alternative should be provided. This can be a cubby bed, a pet tent, or even a box on its side with a soft blanket in it. “Good hiding” spots will always allow you to make eye contact with your foster cat.

One important rule to remember: never pick up a cat that does not know you and you are not familiar with!

Cats that require additional socialization may need to be kept in a crate to facilitate socialization. Crates allow foster providers to more easily handle the animal and prevent the animal from hiding. Some foster parents prefer to use a soft-sided animal playpen. They are often easy to assemble and store away, and help facilitate handling of animals. Pens are also suitable for pregnant or new moms.

Refer to the section on [Working with Shy & Under Social Cats](#) for tips on how to work with very shy, skittish or under-socialized cats.

Food

- Your foster cat will need both wet (canned) and dry food, unless told otherwise (for example, allergies and special diets).
- AVA will provide dry kibble to start. Additional purchased kibble is eligible for a tax receipt from AVA. Foster parents provide wet food, and can either retain all receipts for a charitable tax receipt at the end of the year, or can claim for cash reimbursement according to the [AVA Foster Policy](#).

- In general, it is important to note that cats are obligate carnivores: named animal protein should be the main ingredients in their food. Choose a food with fewer by-products and fillers, such as corn, wheat, soy and other by-products. Most fillers have little nutritional value for cats.
- Serve wet food at room temperature – “mouse temperature” – as most cats don't like cold food. We recommend feeding wet food twice daily in order to ensure they stay hydrated.
- Monitor your foster cat's eating habits daily to ensure that all is well; follow the daily recommended amounts on the pet food packaging to avoid overfeeding.
- Avoid packaged/processed treats on a daily basis; try good quality treats like freeze dried meats.
- Always provide fresh water daily. Some foster parents prefer to use a water fountain made for pets, as resources allow.

Litter Box

- Starting with a brand new litter box is highly recommended. Use an uncovered box to start with so that it is easily accessible to your cat. Use a low entry box for kittens or cats with mobility issues (for example, senior cats, or cats with Cerebellar Hypoplasia.)
- You may need multiple litter boxes depending on how many cats you are fostering. The rule of thumb is one litter box per cat, plus one.
- Keep the litter box away from doors, noisy appliances and as far away as is possible from water and food dishes.
- Always use unscented litter as cats are sensitive to scents and perfumes. Clumping litter is preferred. Some fosters have multiple boxes with different types of litter to help determine the cats' preferences. Providing options can help avoid issues of inappropriate elimination.
 - **Do not use clumping litter for young kittens** as it can stick to their fur and they may ingest it. Wait until two to four months of age before introducing clumping litter to your kitten. Use a non-clumping paper type litter such as Yesterday's News.
- Use only enough litter to cover the bottom of the box, so that the cat can scratch through to the bottom.
- Scoop the litter box once per day, more if you are fostering kittens or multiple cats, adding more litter as needed.

- Wash the litter box with warm soapy water once a month, replacing all the litter. While cats are naturally clean creatures, the litter box is where they leave their scent marker, so the box provides a sense of comfort and belonging.
- If you change the types of litter you are using, do so gradually. While working on the process of changing the type of litter, keep a second litter box with the old litter available continue to add some of the new to it. Cats are creatures of habit and are slow to adjust to change of any kind
- Monitor for any signs of diarrhea, constipation, straining to urinate or excessive urination. If you are concerned, check with your AVA representative immediately.

Other Basic Supplies

- Cat carrier – either a plastic sturdy carrier or a good quality soft sided carrier. AVA can lend you a carrier if you do not already have one.
- Nail clippers.
- Soft bristled brush.
- Adult sized litter box and scoop. Small, low-entry litter box if you are fostering kittens.
- Unscented, clumping litter; or a kitten-safe non-clumping litter.
- Metal or ceramic food dishes, not plastic as they can harbor bacteria.
- Heavier water dish that will not tip over easily.
- Cat toys including interactive wand toys and self-play toys, such as mice, crinkle balls and other suitable toys.
- Scratching posts (horizontal and/or vertical).
- If possible, cat furniture, such as cat trees and perches where they can climb and rest.

Cat Proofing Your Home: The Safety Checklist

All surfaces in the safe room that the cat can reach should be wiped down with a diluted water/bleach solution of 10% bleach (½ cup bleach to a gallon of water) Scrubbing Bubbles can be used. Do not use Lysol, Pine Sol, 409, Spic and Span, or any cleaner ending with 'ol'; these are highly toxic to both kittens and cats.

The real secret to cat proofing your home is to look at each room through their eyes. Get down on the floor and see the world from their view: if anything looks like it might make a great toy or is potentially harmful, remove it.

- Remove all things that a cat might break or harmful substances it might ingest.
- Keep all craft supplies such as needles, thread and balls of yarn in a closed container as these can be fatal if swallowed.
- Secure window blinds so the cat cannot get tangled up in the cord or strangled.
- All windows must have screens on them that are in good repair.
- Clear the floor of rubber bands, ribbon and string as these are all hazardous when ingested and can require surgery.
- Keep cupboard doors and dresser drawers securely closed.
- Cover electrical cords with covers, sold for that purpose, or anything that will keep the cat from chewing on the cords.
- Make sure that each heating and air vent is enclosed with a secure metal cover.
- Remove any living plants from the safe room/household that may be toxic or harmful. Plants like cat grass are safe.
- Please ensure that all toilet lids in your home are down at all times to prevent the cat from using it as a water bowl (or for playtime!).
- If your floors are carpeted, you may wish to put a vinyl covering over the area in the safe room. See the dollar type stores for tarps that work well.
- Keep balcony doors closed and the balcony off limits to your cat at all times.
- As noted above, block off any dangerous or “bad hiding” spots.

Feline Behaviour

Playtime should be a vital part of your foster cat’s daily activities. It gives you a chance to bond with your cat and enjoy their unique behaviour and allows your cat an opportunity to practice its instinctual survival skills.

Physical and mental exercise are essential to a cat's health and well-being. It is crucial for them to expend their energy in healthy and appropriate ways. **Engage in at least two, 10-minute interactive play sessions every day for adult cats; kittens should have at least two, 20-minute interactive play sessions every day.** Set house rules for your cat's behaviour. Everyone who interacts with the cat is required to adhere to and reinforce those rules.

Kittens generally need a lot of daily playtime and often show aggressive behaviour during play: batting, pouncing, even biting make-believe prey (toys). They can use exploratory, investigative and predatory behaviour as well.

The leading cause of destructive behaviour is a lack of play time, so get playing!

Guidance on Appropriate Play

- Play will provide your cat with an opportunity to practice the skills that it would normally need for survival.
- Toys with string, shoelaces, any wand toys, feather toys, and toys with pieces that can be chewed or swallowed, should only be used under guardian supervision and put away after playtime.
- **Hands are not toys!** While this can be cute when they are small, those tiny claws grow quickly. Discourage kittens and cats from playing with your hands or feet, and always redirect their energy to an appropriate toy.
- Always try to redirect any aggressive behaviour onto toys by dragging, dangling or throwing a toy.
- If after attempts to discourage inappropriate play you feel that your cat or kitten is playing too roughly, simply stop the play and leave the room. You must be the one to leave/disengage. Be consistent.
- **Never physically punish a cat.** It only teaches your cat to fear you (or your hands, or the water bottle); cats do not learn through punishment.
- Do not pick up your cat and take it to a 'time out' spot as you will be reinforcing the behaviour you want to change.
- Positive reinforcement is key: after successful play sessions, reward your cat! This is the most effective way to change behaviour.

Handling & Grooming

Some rescue cats may still be learning (or re-learning) to trust humans, so empathy and patience are important tools to help your foster cat be its best, confident cat self.

- Sit down at floor level. It is ideal for a cat to approach you first. Let the cat sniff your hand first – or an object that smells like you, such as eyeglasses or a t-shirt – as smell is one of the cat's most important and strongest senses.
 - For shy or hesitant **kittens**, start by very gently wrapping the kitten up in a soft towel or cat blanket as this can have a calming effect.
- Talk to your cat softly, go slowly, be gentle, and observe the signs your cat gives you. Encourage affection and do this until it starts to enjoy being touched.
- Cats may be sensitive in certain areas such as the lower back, abdomen and paws, so avoid touching these areas initially until you know your cat's preferences. Cats generally like being pet on their face, head and upper neck.

- Tail swishing, pupils dilating, and ears flattening are signals that your cat has become over stimulated. STOP what you are doing: the cat has had enough for now.
- Come back every hour or so and repeat the process for a little longer each time as often as possible.
- Some cats do not like to be picked up so listen to their signals.
- **Brushing:** Give your foster cat time to settle in and get to know you before attempting to brush it. Your cat needs to be brushed but it should be enjoyable. Try different sizes and textures of brush to determine his/her preferences. Brushing gives you an opportunity to examine your cat's body for any possible medical issues.
- **Nail Trimming:** Trim your cat's nails using an appropriate trimmer. Be careful to only trim the clear portion of the nail. The pink/brown part of the nail, called the "quick," is connected to their nerves so be extra careful not to cut this.
 - If you have kittens, get them used to having their paws touched and gently rubbed so that they are accustomed to the process as they get older.
 - Some cats may require a slow adjustment period to trimming since their paws are sensitive and they are protective of them. Be gentle and go slow.
 - If your cat is not used to nail trimming, start by approaching them when they are relaxed. Pet your cat calmly, facing the same direction as your cat. Take a paw in your hand and gently rub it. Slowly push on the pad to extend the claw. If your cat permits you, gently trim the first claw. Trim as many claws as your cat will allow; if you only trim two or three the first time, that's great! Reward them afterward. Try the process again when they are calm and relaxed.

Scratching

This is a natural, healthy and necessary activity for all cats and an essential exercise to maintain healthy muscles. Its muscles can weaken due to an inability to stretch if it does not have a suitable place to scratch. A cat uses its claws to defend, to climb, to exercise, to mark its territory and for an emotional release if it is stressed or excited. Scratching also just feels good!

Cats tend to scratch in social areas – like your couch or your bed – because they are trying to mingle your scent with theirs. Consider it a kitty compliment!

Here are ways to encourage healthy and appropriate scratching.

- Trim its nails using an appropriate trimmer. Be careful to only trim the clear portion of the nail.

- Provide a good quality scratching post; a tall, sturdy, vertical one is best; train your cat to use it; for example, by having it chase a toy up the post.
- A horizontal post will work if your cat likes to scratch carpet.
- Put the post beside any piece of furniture that your cat seems to like to scratch; this provides a better alternative.
- Cover any area or piece of furniture that your cat has chosen to scratch; double-sided tape can act as a deterrent.

Inappropriate Elimination: Going Outside the Box

Here are some reasons that a cat may choose not to use the litter box.

- Cleanliness: the most common reason a cat does not use a litter box is cleanliness. A litter box should be scooped once a day generally, and more frequently for kittens.
- Wrong location: make sure that the box is in a quiet, low traffic area, away from its food. If the cat is going in a specific spot, move the box to that location.
- Too much (or too little) litter in the box: your cat needs to be able to scratch the bottom without going through layers of litter.
- Type of litter: some cats are sensitive to or have a preference for texture. Try a separate box with a new type only. With a second box, transition over the course of a week by slowly adding the new type of litter to the old.
- Anxiety or stress: the cat is now in yet another strange place with unfamiliar people. Note any major changes to the household that may cause it stress.
- Size of box: some larger cats need and prefer more space so ensure you have an appropriate sized box.
- Aversion: the lingering scent from the use of deodorizers, cleaners, or scented litter can be off putting.
- Territorial behaviour: if reusing a litter box, make sure that it has been thoroughly cleaned with a water/bleach solution. Make sure there is at least one box per cat.
- Medical issues: house soiling can indicate a number of medical issues; so watch and listen. **If you hear the cat crying while in the box and there is only a small amount of urine, contact your AVA representative immediately.** A cat eliminating just outside the box can be a sign something is wrong.

Socialization

New People

When introducing new family members or others to foster cats, go slow.

All shoes and bulky items should be removed, and guests should be at floor level. Keep in mind that most people are not familiar with cats and need guidance about petting, handling and playing appropriately with them. Use interactive toys to start with and remember that hands are not toys! Don't mix play time with cuddle time: let the cat finish playing and calm down before starting to handle and pet it.

New Noises

It is always helpful to expose your foster cat to as many of the normal household noises as possible. Start with radio/TV with the volume on low for shy cats.

New Environments

If your foster cat seems to have adjusted well to the 'safe room', then allow your cat to explore new spaces – only if this is appropriate for your home as consideration should be given to resident cats/pets and whether this is appropriate for both the foster cat and your resident pets. See information below on introducing animals. Follow your foster cat's lead; for shy cats, build their confidence by playing with them and rewarding their positive exploration in new spaces.

New Animal Introductions

Visit the [AVA website](#) for detailed instructions on Introducing the New Cat to the Current Cat. For dogs, as with all animals, don't be in a hurry! The basis for a successful cat and dog introduction is to expose them to each other gradually and under strictly supervised conditions. If your dog has had a positive experience living with a cat and your cat has had a positive experience being around a dog, then quite possibly they will move easily into tolerating each other. However, it is likely that your cat and dog will need much more time and structure to achieve coexistence.

Children & Foster Cats

You must teach children the proper way to behave around cats and what they can and cannot do.

- Above all, shoes off, down at floor level and using quiet voices only.
- Children should by no means approach a cat that is eating, sleeping or using a litter box.
- Never allow a child to pick up, squeeze, yank, pull, hit or throw objects at a cat.
- Always supervise children and do not allow them to chase or corner the cat.

- Cats that feel threatened will resort to aggression.

Not all foster cats will respond well to children, so exercise discretion if your foster cats are very timid or afraid of loud noises.

Working with Shy & Under Social Cats

Here are the Top Five Tips for working with your shy foster cat, especially when you first bring the cat home:

1. **Safe Hiding:** When you first bring home a rescue cat, set up your safe room according to the instructions about the [Safe Room/Sanctuary Room](#).
2. **Hang Out:** Spend time in the safe room. Read text messages or articles aloud and narrate your actions. This allows the cat get used to your voice and your presence as a non-threat. Always get low and quiet with shy and timid cats: sit or lie down to make yourself small, without shoes or boots. Leave one of your t-shirts or objects with your smell on it near their sleeping/nesting area that they can smell it on their own time; leave treats near it so they can start to associate your smell with good things.
3. **The Slow Blink:** Lie on the floor and slowly blink your eyes several times. The idea is to get the cat to blink back or soften their eyes back at you. This is a sign of trust for cats: only predators don't blink! Try this as a first step before going in for pets. When you first introduce your hand to a cat, bring it in slowly but smoothly, palm down. Let the cat smell your hand. Watch the cat's communication signals: if they show signs of fear (ears back or flat, eyes wide and dilated), stop and take a step back. Try to reengage in slow blinking. If their ears are forward and they seem receptive, go in for a pet on their cheeks to release some positive pheromones.
4. **Food Rewards:** Find out what your foster cat's favourite treats are and use this knowledge to build a positive association between you and the cat. If your cat is afraid of hands, try to toss a treat in their direction (but not at them!) If they eat it, gradually toss them closer and closer to you. With each treat work up to getting yourself closer to the cat as much as they will comfortably tolerate, building up to them eating out of your hand. This may happen over several days or even weeks. The idea will be to eventually pair your touch with the reward of the treat.
5. **Play Time:** Play time can be therapeutic for rescue cats in particular. Engaging in play helps build their confidence by tapping into their natural abilities and strengths. Cats take pride in catching their prey and they can quickly forget their shyness when they are lost in the "hunt." For shy or timid cats, even watching (called "tracking") a toy's movements means the cat is mentally engaged. This still counts as play. You can start by using long feathers along the floor or wall. Playing peek-a-boo with the feather under doors or around corners can also pique their curiosity. Build up to an actual hunt and chase. Sustained, daily playtime routines are important to maintaining their confidence level, creating a

positive relationship between you and your cat, and also and also keeping them active and healthy.

A few other notes

- **Sounds can be scary.** Some cats can be startled easily, so start with a quiet environment and slowly introduce new sounds, like radio or television, at low volumes and gradually increase them. As you do this, pair the sounds with rewards like wet food, treats or play – whatever will act as a positive reinforcement for your cat.
- **Provide sanctuary spaces.** If you can predict a situation that the cat might find stressful or scary (for example, new visitors), make sure they have a safe room with everything they need (food, water, litterbox, toys, scratching post etc.)
- **Trust is a process.** The time to build a relationship may take longer than with other cats. Don't forget to acknowledge the progress your cat makes, and also your role in helping them become confident, happy, adoptable kitties. Sometimes a small step is a big one for a shy cat. Reward yourselves!

Keeping Your Foster Cat Indoors

You may think that letting your cat outdoors is the natural thing to do; however, cats, much like children, depend on us to recognize the dangers and protect them from harm. Many of our cats have been rescued from the dangers of the outdoors and AVA foster cats must always be indoors. The list below contains just a few of the lethal risks the outdoors poses to your cat:

- **Traffic:** being hit by a vehicle can leave your cat very seriously injured or killed.
- **Poison:** pets can easily come into contact with poisonous substances put out by your neighbours, even though it is illegal to do so; antifreeze dripping from a car has a sweet taste but is lethal.
- **Cruelty:** regrettably there are people who have no qualms about intentionally being cruel to animals.
- **Trauma:** allowing your cat outside exposes it to injuries from fighting with other cats, dogs and wild animals; bite wounds tend to abscess and can prove fatal.
- **Disease:** even a vaccinated pet can contract serious diseases such as FIV (feline HIV) and Feline Leukemia.

Signs Your Foster Cat May Be Sick

The following is provided as background information. **Please contact your AVA representative immediately if your cat is ill or injured.** Below are signs to watch for:

- Shortness of breath
- Appetite loss; or weight loss despite good appetite
- Increase drinking
- Severe constipation, severe diarrhea, dehydration
- Straining to urinate
- Upper respiratory infection (with signs that resemble a common cold, including sneezing, runny eyes with discharge, and lethargy)
- Low energy, lethargy or hiding
- Dragging hind quarters on floor
- Physical issues including an enlarged abdomen, red or swollen gums, excessive drooling or lumps.

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