



WOMEN'S
ANIMAL CENTER
America's First Animal Shelter™

Blue Cat Protocol

If a cat has been evaluated as “Blue,” that indicates that Women’s Animal Center staff members have noted a higher level of stress in the animal that would benefit from participation in our positive reinforcement behavior modification plans.

Stress manifests in many ways in a shelter environment, but generally speak the blue cats fall into three categories:

Fearful

Cats that are fearful will engage with people, but tend to stay in their hiding spots (litterbox, cardboard box, etc.). They enjoy attention, and we might even notice that they purr when they’re engaged, but they don’t come to the front of the cage, and they don’t engage with adopters who are browsing the room.

Antisocial

These are cats that are both afraid (hiding and not coming to the front of the cage) and also not pleased to see people. They might retreat from us when we reach out to introduce ourselves (seek to increase distance), or make a vocalization that indicates that they don’t want attention (hissing, growling).

Overstimulated

Cats that are overstimulated tend to be engaged with us, but their tolerance for attention and engagement is limited. At some point, petting or playing becomes too much for them, and they swat or retreat.

Cats may fluctuate among these categories during their time here, but our goal with the positive reinforcement program is to bring their stress down so that they begin displaying calm, social behaviors.

Supplies

To engage in these plans, you will need supplies, all of which can be found in the Cat Pawsitive Room.

- 1) Clicker
- 2) Food of choice for the cat that you’re working with
 - a. Among the popular treats among cats that we have on hand are dry treats, wet food, and Halo dehydrated treats. With Halo, make sure you add a bit of water!
 - b. You can also bring food from home. Cold cuts and meat-based baby food are popular among our residents as well.
 - c. With wet food, you’ll want a tongue depressor or wooden spoon to deliver the food; with baby food, you’ll want a tongue depressor, wooden spoon, or empty syringe.
 - d. Bring some options! Just like people, cats love variety!
- 3) Target stick

Notes:

- If you click accidentally, you still reward. We always want them to associate a click with food.
- If the cat does something you don’t like, ignore it. Wait for the behavior you want. By engaging with bad behavior we either a) create a positive reinforcement for that behavior or b) create more stress in the animal.
- Record each session in the cat’s Behavior Tracking sheet! This allows multiple volunteers to work with a cat and continue progress.

Protocol for Fearful Cats

With fearful cats, the first thing we need to identify is what the cat's afraid of. Generally, we're dealing with cats that are overwhelmed by a lot of activity – so they're afraid of noise and sudden movements. What we need to work on with these cats is drawing them to the front of the cage, and gradually increasing the amount of time we're having them spend there. We can do this fairly simply with targeting: you can either use your finger or a target stick and hold it out far enough away from them that they have to stretch a little bit to sniff it. Once they touch it with their nose (or get very, very close, depending on how fearful the cat still is), click and immediately reward with a treat.

If the cat is afraid of the target stick (or whatever you're using), pull it back a little bit so that it's reaction is less severe, and reward for eye contact with the target. Once it gets more comfortable and is reliably looking at the stick without fear, stop rewarding for eye contact and hold out for the physical contact.

The goal with target is to get them closer and closer to us. Once they're reliably touching it, start using the stick to target your closed fist and reward for their nose contacting your fist. Again, once they're doing that reliably, start drawing your fist closer and closer to the front. Once they're coming to the front, we can start building more interesting things for them to do! Building their confidence with behaviors like sit and high five are great ways to engage these cats. If they're comfortable with handling, this would be a good time to start bringing them into the Cat Pawsitive Room.

If the cat seems to be more fearful of more extensive handling (beyond just chin and cheek scratches), we want to work on desensitizing them to that. We can start the same way – drawing the cat to the front through targeting. Once they're doing that, we can move on to handling desensitization. We want to take this super slow, and keep close watch for any signs that the cat is getting uncomfortable (it moves away, starts getting piloerect, etc.) We want to start at 1 and move through each line until 21. In order to move onto the next line, the cat should be getting five in a row of the current line without any signs of anxiety. After each engagement, we should be clicking and rewarding with food!

Chin	1	Stay for 1-hand 2-second chin touch
	2	Stay for 1-hand 3-second chin scratch
	3	Stay for 1-hand 5-second chin scratch
Cheeks	4	Stay for 1-hand 2-second cheek touch
	5	Stay for 1-hand 3-second cheek scratch
	6	Stay for 1-hand 5-second cheek scratch
Side of Neck	7	Stay for 1-hand 2-second neck touch
	8	Stay for 1-hand 3-second neck scratch
	9	Stay for 1-hand 5-second neck scratch
Back of Neck	10	Stay for 1-hand 2-second neck touch
	11	Stay for 1-hand 3-second neck touch
	12	Stay for 1-hand 5-second neck touch
Shoulders	13	Stay for 1-hand 2-second shoulder touch
	14	Stay for 1-hand 3-second shoulder touch
	15	Stay for 1-hand 5-second shoulder touch
Back	16	Stay for 1-hand 2-second back touch
	17	Stay for 1-hand 3-second back scratch
	18	Stay for 1-hand 5-second back scratch
Picking Up	19	Stay for 2-hands around cat
	20	Stay for gentle lift
	21	Stay for holding in arms for 3 seconds before returning to surface

Protocol for Antisocial Cats

Approach the cat's cage and observe the cat. We're looking for some kind of social behavior. A good starting place is eye contact, but even if all we can get is some kind of improvement in body language, that will begin drawing them out. As soon as you get the behavior, click and then immediately reward by depositing a treat. You can also draw their attention to you with the noisy toy or a treat.

We don't want to overwhelm them with our presence, so especially at first we want to keep the training sessions short. Each time reward them for a behavior, give them a 30-second break, and then reengage. For the first few sessions, we're probably only going to repeat this cycle with the cat 4 or 5 times.

Once the cat has begun regularly engaging in eye contact, we can add some targeting. You can either use your finger or a target stick and hold it out far enough away from them that they have to stretch a little bit to sniff it. Once they touch it with their nose (or get very, very close, depending on how fearful the cat still is), click and immediately reward with a treat.

If the cat is afraid of the target stick (or whatever you're using), pull it back a little bit so that its reaction is less severe, and reward for eye contact with the target. Once it gets more comfortable and is reliably looking at the stick without fear, stop rewarding for eye contact and hold out for the physical contact.

The goal with target is to get them closer and closer to us. Once they're reliably touching it, start using the stick to target your closed fist and reward for their nose contacting your fist. Again, once they're doing that reliably, start drawing your fist closer and closer to the front. Once they're coming to the front, we can start building more interesting things for them to do! Building their confidence with behaviors like sit and high five are great ways to engage these cats.

Protocol for Overstimulated Cats

Overstimulated cats need to get some energy out, so before we engage them with training, we want to engage them with play. Bring them into the Cat Pawsitive room using a clean cat carrier, lined with a towel sprayed with Feliway, and use a wand toy to do some lure play with them.

After 5-10 minutes of play, we can start engaging them with targeting. Use your hand (either open or in a fist) and hold it out far enough away from them that they have to stretch a little bit to sniff it. Once they touch it with their nose, click and immediately reward with a treat.

Once they're reliable targeting your hand, begin desensitizing them. We want to take this super slow, and keep close watch for any signs that the cat is getting uncomfortable (it moves away, starts getting piloerect, etc.) We want to start at 1 and move through each line until 21. In order to move onto the next line, the cat should be getting five in a row of the current line without any signs of anxiety. After each engagement, we should be clicking and rewarding with food!

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	20	Stay for gentle lift
	21	Stay for holding in arms for 3 seconds before returning to surface