Introducing a Cat to a New Territory

Importance of Confinement
The setting at the shelter, the car ride home and meeting new people can add to your new cat’s stress levels. When introducing your cat into a new home, he’ll need time to adjust. Make the adjustment period shorter by allowing the cat to become accustomed to his new home slowly through confinement. Only once they are comfortable in their space can they feel comfortable eating, drinking, resting and eliminating.

Confinement is especially crucial for shy or fearful cats as they may be overwhelmed when moving into a new home. Given free run of the house, a scared cat will often bolt around, looking for a safe place to hide. Cats can injure themselves running into furniture or walls in a panic. They may also hide somewhere unsafe, such as under the stove or inside a reclining chair and stay hidden for several days.

A safe room will allow your new cat a small space where he’ll feel secure. The less worried he is, the more social he can become.

Kittens especially benefit from an initial confinement to a small room or even to a large crate. This will provide time to kitten-proof the rest of the house. When left alone, a smaller kitten should be confined for three reasons:

- It reinforces good litter box habits
- It prevents accidents where the kitten might injure himself
- It means no more searching for kittens hiding from view

When bringing a new cat into your home with resident cats, put the new cat in his “special” room for a few days, even a few weeks. This allows the resident cat(s) and the new cat to get to know each other via scent without having to see each other face to face.

You’ll know the new cat is ready to explore more of the house when:

- He is performing his natural functions: eating, resting, grooming, using the litter box
- He is responsive to petting and playing
- He is comfortable with normal activities in the room and is not afraid
- He is showing interest in leaving the room

When possible, allow the new cat to expand his territory slowly, ideally one room at a time. If at anytime the cat seems overwhelmed, return him to his safe room and try again later.

Don’t feel bad about confining the cat. It will help him relax and adjust to his new surrounding much quicker.
Setting up the Space
Your new cat’s safe space should be a small, quiet room such as a bathroom, small office or large walk-in closet. Make sure the room does not have any hiding spots that might endanger him. A box tipped on its side with a towel often provides a good “hiding” spot for the cat to feel safe.

The cat’s room should be set up with a litter box on one end of the room, and food, water and bedding as far away from the litter box as possible. He should have some safe toys, including a scratching post and should have visits from you while in the room.

Beginning Interactions with the Family
Start off slowly while visiting - not too much petting or interacting until he has had some time to settle in. Sit in the room and wait to see if the cat will approach. If not, offer him a hand to sniff. Give him frequent breaks and work up to gentle face pets. Be patient and remember that every cat’s adjustment time is different.

If the cat does go under the bed or behind a bookshelf, he should not be pulled out of hiding to interact.

Identification
Put a collar and identification tag on your new cat with name, current address and phone number. Even if your cat is not allowed outside, this is still a good idea because there is always a chance he might slip through an open door or window and become lost. There are collars made especially for cats. These break-away collars can be buckled snugly around the cat’s neck, but will stretch or open and let him escape if he should become hung up on a tree limb or fence.

The first time a collar is placed on your cat, provide him with a new catnip-filled toy at the same time to distract him from the odd feeling of wearing the collar. It’s likely that by the time the cat is done with the toy, they won’t even notice the collar.

Moving
When moving into a new home, it is best to confine the cat to a safe room during the process. This prevents the cat from being exposed to the chaos of people and all the strange activity that comes from a move. It also prevents the cat from escaping out a door during the commotion. Be sure movers know there is a cat inside by placing a sign on the room where the cat is staying.

Eliminate any chance of escape when transporting your cat to his new home by placing him in a secure carrier while he is still in his safe room. In the new house, again give the cat a safe room to adjust to before allowing her full access to the house.