



## **Working with Fearful Cats**

### **WELCOME!**

Cat Zone 2 is where we keep the special needs cats– those who are extremely shy/fearful/under-socialized or recovering from surgery or illness – who need consistent, specialized care from experienced volunteers with cat behavior training.

In the coming months you will be invited to attend the Cat Behavior Training. We ask for a one-year commitment to CZ2 volunteering, for at least 2 hours a week, due to the amount of training involved PPL

When you start, we may assign you specific cats to visit, until you have more experience. With proper approval, you will be able to visit most CZ2 cats, except the ones marked “CZ2 Leads Only”. After 40 hours of working with CZ2 cats, you can check with staff to be reevaluated for approval to visit the “Leads Only” cats.

Retraining from time to time may be appropriate, and please feel free to ask for more training if you have questions or concerns about working with our CZ2 cats.

## YOUR VOLUNTEER DAY IN CAT ZONE 2

1. **Enter the Cat Zone 2 room quietly and place your coat/bag/etc. under the table or in a corner out of the way.** Keep valuables with you. (CZ2 is a **QUIET ZONE**. Please speak in a quiet voice and refrain from unnecessary conversations. Do not slam condo doors or make unnecessary noise, which may stress the cats.)
2. Sign and Date the CZ2 **Volunteer Sign-in Sheet** with your time in and out.
3. **Review the CZ2 Cat-a-Log and read the recent visit notes of all the cats you plan to visit. (ALWAYS READ THE CAT-A-LOG, even if it is a cat you are very familiar with. A cat's behavior and/or temperament can change from day-to-day based on a variety of factors so it is important to read the visit notes **every time** before you visit a cat.)**
4. **Be sure to bring toys, brushes, and treats with you for your visit.** (When appropriate, you may need other supplies: towels, gloves, baby food, paintbrush, etc.)
5. **Initial the Visit List on the clipboard next to the cat you are visiting. (Cats that have not had a recent visit should be visited first.)**
6. **Each cat in CZ2 should receive a visit of at least 20 minutes or more unless they are over-stimulators.** (It takes shy cats longer to warm up, and short visits tend to stress them without giving them time to build trust and/or relax.)
7. **Write up your visit in the CZ2 Cat-a-Log.** (Notes should include information about the cat's demeanor, what techniques were used, what worked or didn't work, and any progress.)

### Each visit should strive to involve the following:

1. **Start slow, come into the room and talk quietly to the cat(s).** Be patient, go slow, pay attention to signals/body language, and don't overstep the cat's boundaries. We want the cats to have as many positive experiences with people as possible to help them build trust. We do not want to push the cats out of their comfort zone by upsetting them or causing them to react aggressively. Keep in mind that these cats have experienced a lot of stressful situations before they arrived at Cat Town.
2. **Sit near the cat, offer your hand and see if the cat smells you.** If yes, then good. If not, continue to talk quietly to the cat until it relaxes and try again.
3. Offer a **treat and try to pet the cat (with paint brush or hand).**
4. **If petting goes well, keep offering gentle pets.** Try chin rubs and gentle pets near the cat's head. Avoid the back area of the cat at first – some cats don't like pets near the back.

**After petting, try some playtime.** Do not interchange playtime with petting. Some cats don't understand and will try to swat at you if you try petting it during playtime. We want to avoid confusing the cat in this way.

5. **The cats do not always require touching or petting.** Just being in the enclosure and talking to the cat, reading a book aloud, or softly singing to a cat can help them build trust, become less fearful, and perhaps even look forward to interactions with people. At the very least you are showing the cat that people are not something that they need to fear.
6. **End all visits on a quiet note.** Stop playtime and talk to the cat(s) before you leave the room.

## WRITING UP VISITS

Please write up a brief, concise, and accurate description of your visit – what behaviors did the cat exhibit? Is it showing improvement? Is its behavior regressing? What other factors may be influencing the behavior? (For example: there was a lot of noise/activity in CZ2) Did the cat demonstrate any behaviors that we may not have been aware of?

It is okay to write things like “I love this kitty”, “A real love-bug”, etc. Please do NOT write things like “boring”, “doesn't like people”, “seems mean”, or anything negative that not only may hinder the cat from being adopted, but is not an accurate behavioral evaluation. Some better ways to express an unsuccessful visit: “withdrawn”, “frozen”, for example, or actually describing the physical activity – swatting, hissing, growling, striking out when approached.

If the cat is exhibiting any signs of overstimulation or aggression, it is helpful if you can describe the activity that was happening when the behavior occurred and what body language the cat was showing. For example, were you petting the cat? Where? Playing with a toy? Did it give a head turn, have dilated pupils, give a cranky meow, quick body movements, twitchy tail, or any other signals? If it bit, was the bite soft, medium, or hard? Did the cat give warning signals before biting? Did it respond to correction?

It is also helpful to describe techniques that you used to work with the cat – for example: baby food, playtime (which toys), massage, etc.

Here are some examples of visit write-ups:

*Good visit. Was happily surprised to see Trixie sitting at the enclosure door when I entered CZ2! She didn't bolt away when I went in but did move back under the foot stool and watched me from there. I was able to tempt her out from under the stool with some baby food which she ate from my finger; is careful and only licks, no bites. After bbf she retreated back under the foot stool but I was able to encourage her to lean quite a way out for Party Mix. She didn't want to play, but she did watch the string toy with great interest as I played with Princess. Did swat at me 1x (without claws) when I reached under the stool to pet her. Ended visit with some quiet talk and a little more bbf under the foot stool. Made great eye contact during visit; did blinkies at me as well. Doing much better – seems a lot more confident!*

*No hisses! In fact, Fluffy enticed me to come in by running up to the door as I walked by. He immediately was interested in the wand toy with the burlap covered mouse. After a few minute of play he gave a few chirps and then started rubbing against me for pets. He alternated for the rest of the visit between playing and rubbing/petting. He was a little hand-shy, so I went slowly. After 20 mins he started meowing and rubbing/walking back and forth faster. My hand was still, he was rubbing his cheek against it, and he bit medium-hard. I said “no” and he withdrew but he still seemed interested in play. I left soon after. Possibly meowing was his signal that he was getting overstimulated. Maybe he needs a 10-15 minute visit instead of 20 minutes. He is a nice boy, I think we just need to figure him out.*

*Bilbo was in his carrier as usual but did look me in the eyes as I sat down. I sang to him and when I moved my hand toward him, he withdrew and moved back against the side of the carrier. I kept singing and he moved back into the center of the carrier. After a few minutes I tried to pet him again and he again retreated to the back of the carrier so I stopped trying to engage him physically and just talked/sang to him for the rest of the visit. He needs a very slow, patient approach!*

## **DO's**

- Wash/sanitize hands between visiting each cat to prevent spreading illness
- Approach crates/cages slowly and in full view of the cat. Be predictable so you don't startle the cat.
- Talk to the cat in a calm, slow, and steady tone.
- Get down on the cat's level – this provides a better opportunity for the cat to approach you and makes you less threatening to them.
- Let the cat come to you – be at their level. Extend one finger to the cat. If they respond and approach, then offer your hand for the cat to inspect before attempting to pet them. If they seem unwilling or you have doubts about touching them, see if you can coax them by offering a toy to play or a treat. If they are still not interesting in playing, petting, or eating, just talk, read aloud, or sing softly to them.
- Be aware of all health issues and tell staff immediately if the cat has vomited, has diarrhea, or runny eyes, etc.

## **DONT's**

- Do not reprimand the cats in any way other than saying “No” to get it to stop a behavior.
- Do not use any part of your body as a toy. This can confuse the cat and lead to biting behavior which may make them have a more difficult time getting adopted.
- Do not pick up the cats unless absolutely necessary. If you must pick one up, do not grab them by the scruff of the neck, front legs, or tail because you could injure them (throw the back and neck out of alignment, pull the tail out of socket, etc.) and risk getting scratched or bitten.
- Do not share toys between enclosures/crates. This risks spreading illnesses between them.
- Do not leave strings, straws, ribbons, feathered toys, or anything the cats could possibly swallow or choke on in their space.

- Do not let the cats out of their spaces.
- Do not put yourself in between two cats who are disagreeing. Give a loud clap and say “NO!” to try and startle them away from one another.

## **FELINE BODY LANGUAGE AND WHAT IT MEANS**

Cats are not always unpredictable. They will often give you signs of what they are about to do if you know what to look for. Watch the cat’s body language for signs that s/he may need a break. If the cat shows signs of overstimulation, irritation, or fear, good solutions may include:

- Playing with a cat toy
- Stop petting
- Just talk
- Leave

Body language given to communicate irritation, overstimulation, or fear:

- Ears lowered or flat
- Lip licking
- Tail swishing rapidly from side to side, vibrating, or just the tip swishing
- Walking away
- Quick body movements
- Puffed tail and/or backside
- Hissing
- Quick head turn or watches your hand while you pet
- Long, drawn out meow
- Dilated pupils, wide open eyes
- Refusal to make eye contact
- Refusal to smell your hand when you hold it to the cat’s face
- Tight or tense body
- Ducks when you attempt to pet her/him
- Jerky movements
- Nips or bites
- Backs up or corners her/himself
- Growls or gives very loud hiss
- Raises paw to strike or swat at you



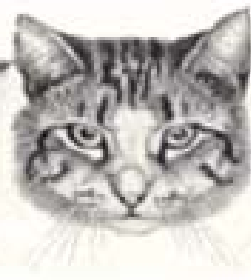
**Happy**



**Angry**



**Frightened**



**Playful**

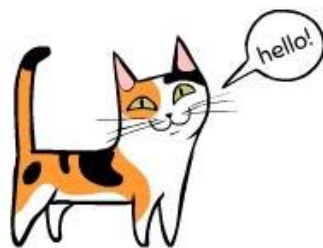


**Content**

# CAT LANGUAGE



INTERESTED



FRIENDLY



ATTENTIVE



RELAXED



TRUSTING



FRIENDLY, RELAXED



CONTENT



CONFLICTED, CAUTIOUS



PLAYFUL



EXCITED



"THIS IS MINE"



ANXIOUS



PREDATORY



WORRIED



FRIGHTENED



THREATENED



TERRIFIED



SUPER TERRIFIED



IRRITATED





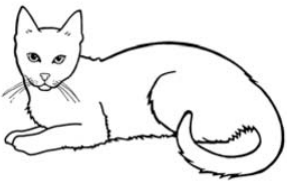

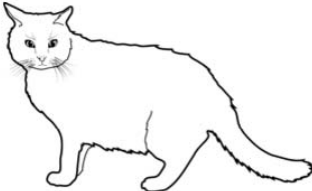
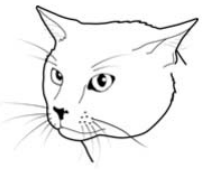






DISGUSTED



## Reading your cat's "body language"

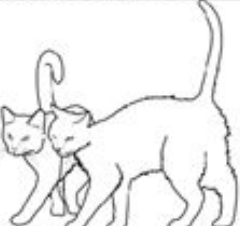




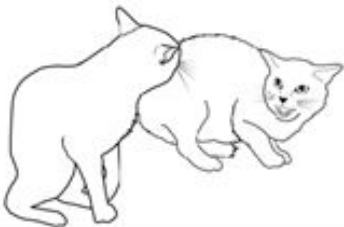
Cats use different body postures to communicate their emotions. Below are some typical postures you may observe in your cat. When observing your cat, try to get an idea of its usual attitude when alone and in contact with other animals, including people. As cats become more anxious about their surroundings, they will try to avoid contact with threats. Their score may change very quickly depending on the seriousness of the threat. The highest scores usually are seen only when escape is not possible.

Score	Body Postures	Head Postures
<b>1</b> Relaxed	<p><b>Activity</b> – sleeping or resting, alert or active, may be playing  <b>Body</b> – lying on side, on belly or sitting; if standing or moving, back horizontal  <b>Breathing</b> – slow to normal  <b>Legs</b> – bent, hind legs may be laid out; when standing extended  <b>Tail</b> – extended or loosely wrapped; up or loosely down when standing</p> 	<p><b>Head</b> – laid on surface or over body, some movement  <b>Eyes</b> – closed to open, pupils slit to normal size  <b>Ears</b> – normal to forward  <b>Whiskers</b> – normal to forward  <b>Sounds</b> – none, purr</p> 
<b>2</b> Alert	<p><b>Activity</b> – resting, awake or actively exploring  <b>Body</b> – lying on belly or sitting; if standing or moving the back is horizontal  <b>Breathing</b> – normal  <b>Legs</b> – bent; when standing extended  <b>Tail</b> – on body or curved back; up or tense downwards when standing; may be twitching</p> 	<p><b>Head</b> – over the body, some movement  <b>Eyes</b> – open normally, pupils normal  <b>Ears</b> – normal or erected to front or back  <b>Whiskers</b> – normal to forward  <b>Sounds</b> – none or meow</p> 
<b>3</b> Tense	<p><b>Activity</b> – resting or alert, may be actively exploring, trying to escape  <b>Body</b> – lying on belly or sitting; if standing or moving the back of the body is lower than the front ("slinking")  <b>Breathing</b> – normal  <b>Legs</b> – bent, hind legs bent and front legs extended when standing  <b>Tail</b> – close to body; tense downwards or curled forward, may be twitching when standing.</p> 	<p><b>Head</b> – over the body or pressed to body, little or no movement  <b>Eyes</b> – wide open or pressed together, pupils normal to partially dilated  <b>Ears</b> – erected to front or back  <b>Whiskers</b> – normal to forward  <b>Sounds</b> – none, meow, or plaintive meow</p> 
<b>4</b> Anxious	<p><b>Activity</b> – alert, may be actively trying to escape  <b>Body</b> – lying on belly or sitting; if standing or moving the back of the body is lower than the front  <b>Breathing</b> – normal or fast  <b>Legs</b> – under body, bent when standing  <b>Tail</b> – close to the body; may be curled forward close to body when standing. The tip may move up and down or side to side.</p> 	<p><b>Head</b> – on the plane of the body, little or no movement  <b>Eyes</b> – wide open, pupils dilated  <b>Ears</b> – partially flattened  <b>Whiskers</b> – normal to forward or back  <b>Sounds</b> – none, plaintive meow, growling, yowling</p> 
<b>5</b> Fearful	<p><b>Activity</b> – motionless, alert or crawling  <b>Body</b> – lying on belly or crouched directly on top of all paws, may be shaking; if standing the whole body is near to the ground, may be shaking  <b>Breathing</b> – fast  <b>Legs</b> – bent; when standing bent near to surface  <b>Tail</b> – close to the body; curled forward close to the body when standing.</p> 	<p><b>Head</b> – near to surface motionless  <b>Eyes</b> – fully open, pupils fully dilated  <b>Ears</b> – fully flattened  <b>Whiskers</b> – back  <b>Sounds</b> – none, plaintive meow, growling, yowling</p> 
<b>6</b> Terrified	<p><b>Activity</b> – motionless alert  <b>Body</b> – crouched directly on top of all paws, shaking. Hair on back and tail bushy.  <b>Breathing</b> – fast  <b>Legs</b> – stiff or bent to increase apparent size  <b>Tail</b> – close to body</p> 	<p><b>Head</b> – lower than the body  <b>Eyes</b> – fully opened, pupils fully dilated  <b>Ears</b> – fully flattened, back on head  <b>Whiskers</b> – back  <b>Sounds</b> – none, plaintive meow, growling, yowling, hissing</p> 





Cat's postures also try to communicate their emotions about other animals to them. These postures often are either friendly or conflict-related, depending on the situation at the time you observe them. Conflict related behaviors are often more subtle than those shown here, and only noticed when one learns what to look for. For example, you also might observe one cat appearing tense or anxious when another (more dominant) cat blocks access to food, litter boxes, or other resources in the home. Cat behavior can be quite complex; entire books on the subject are available. These descriptions of the basic postures are only provided as an introduction to your cat's emotions.

<b>Friendly postures</b>	
	<p>When cats approach in a friendly way they often hold their tail straight up, whiskers forward, and rub their chins or heads against other cats or people. Cats do this when greeting, or when confidently investigating something new.</p>
	<p>When cats want to play they may roll over and expose their bellies.  (Females also may display this behavior during mating.)</p>
	<p>Cats also may arch their tails over the back or may move it fast when they are happy and want to play. Their pupils may be dilated (large) and ears forward. Cats with rapidly moving tails can be quite aroused, however, and it may not be a good idea to play with them as they may become aggressive and bite or scratch.</p>
<b>Conflict-related postures</b>	
	<p>When a cat (left cat) is about to attack, the body is held in a straight-forward position, pupils are narrow, the tail may be moving rapidly from side to side, ears are back, and whiskers are forward.</p>
	<p>When a cat is defending itself from another cat (right cat) it will lean backwards with an arched back. It may move the tail very fast, arch it over the back, or put it between the back legs. The ears are flat, pupils dilated (large), and the hairs may be erect. Cats do this to appear as large and threatening as possible.</p>
	<p>When the threat is near, the belly and legs of the defensive cat (right cat) may touch the floor. The ears and whiskers will be back and flat against the head and the teeth may be exposed. Unlike dogs, cats only expose their bellies to show submission to try to stop an attack when no escape is possible, or when the cat is at the back of a cage or under furniture and wants to be able to slash with all four paws at any hand coming toward them.</p>

Adapted from Kessler MR, Turner DC. Stress and adaptation of cats (*Felis silvestris catus*) housed singly, in pairs and in groups in boarding catteries. *Animal Welfare* 1997;6:243-254. Beaver BV. *Feline Behavior: A guide for veterinarians*. St. Louis: Elsevier Science, 2003:349, and UFAW *Animal Welfare Research Report No. 8: An ethogram for behavioural studies of domestic cats*, 1995.

## THE PAINTBRUSH

The Paintbrush is used to work with shy, under-socialized, and semi-feral cats and kittens to help them tolerate touch. It is less threatening than a hand. The paintbrush cannot be a substitute for hands on socialization for young kittens, but can be helpful for older kittens.

Go slowly. If the cat is biting the paintbrush, it is not ready for touch. Sometimes it helps to leave the paintbrush in the enclosure with the cat to help reduce fear of it. Even if you can only touch the cat or kitten once with the paintbrush before it starts biting it, touch it the one time and stop. Give a treat – chicken or turkey baby food works well, but make sure it has no onion listed in the ingredients.

The shoulder is a good place to start. Slide the paintbrush slowly toward the cat; if it smells the paintbrush, that's a good sign. Use your instincts. If the cat seems ready, stroke the shoulder. If it doesn't appear too stressed, try gently stroking the cat's cheek. If the cat appears stressed with whatever you are doing, put the paintbrush down and go back a step. Some signs of stress can include licking its lips, eyes dilating more than when you started, flattening their ears to the side (also known as "airplane ears"). Some positive signs are leaning into the paint brush strokes, eye blinks, perking the ears, and of course, coming over to smell you.

Some cats respond so well to the paintbrush that they don't want anything to do with your hand and may actually become more fearful when attempting to pet with a hand. It is important to use the paintbrush as an introduction to touch, and to slowly introduce the idea of your hand. For example, when stroking the cat's cheek, if they are rubbing into the stroking with the paintbrush, slowly inch your hand up the handle. Slowly replace the paintbrush with your hand. For many fearful cats this works best if your hand is approaching from the side or the back of the head.

Finally, for some cats that overstimulate, the paintbrush can be used to find out where a cat's threshold for petting/touch is. This is a more limited use, since the goal with over-stimulators is not to go past their threshold, but when working with a cat for the first time it can be helpful to pet with your hand for a limited time, give a break, and then continue with the paintbrush.

## WORKING WITH FEARFUL CATS AND FEAR AGGRESSION

What to bring with you:

- Baby food (bbf) and tongue depressors
- Small toys
- Paintbrush
- Gloves

With fearful/under-socialized cats, you need to take a very slow, gentle approach. **Do not pick the cat up or pull it out of hiding.** A scared cat who is hiding should be petted in its hiding space. Picking up these cats not only makes them feel less secure, but could make them less trustful of people as they may worry that they will be handled against their will every time a person comes in the room.

Enter the enclosure quietly. Sit down, allowing some space between you and the cat, and give the cat a few minutes to get used to your presence. Then, you can slowly offer your hand to the cat (**if the cat is known to be fear-aggressive, see the section below on approach**). If the cat seems slightly responsive, gently touch the cat. Keep your hand low, or approach from behind the head as some cats are fearful of hands coming at their face. Move slowly at all times. Try some chin or ear rubs and gentle head petting from the back. If you are getting a positive response, you may try a full body stroke. If the cat starts over-stimulating or seems to have areas that are sensitive to petting, avoid those areas and focus on the places s/he seems to like having petted. If the cat is still frozen, try offering baby food (bbf) on a tongue depressor. If the cat responds to the bbf, you can incorporate small amounts of petting to this routine.

Although you want to physically interact with the cat as much as possible, you do not want to agitate the cat at any time. You may not get much response from a cat frozen from fear. In this case, try getting a response to being touched by the paintbrush or try to interest it in playtime with small toys. Even just watching the toy can be a good sign (unless the cat is cowering away from the toy, in which case, it is too soon to try playtime). It is okay to just sit in the room and talk to the cats, but whenever possible, **it is best to try to work with the cat directly for at least part of your visit.** We want them to get used to human interaction and touch in a positive way.

These cats may need longer visits to help them get used to you and build trust (**20 minutes minimum, ideally longer**). They also benefit from seeing the same people, especially at the early stages of their stay so they can build trust. Later on, they will need to expand their socialization by receiving visits from many different people.

Fear aggressive cats may swat, hiss, bite, or scratch when approached. These cats need a lot of time and positive associations with people to learn to trust. Wear gloves, and do not attempt to physically touch the cat at first.

Sit in the room and let the cat get used to your presence. Be sure to allow plenty of space between yourself and the cat. Do not stare at the cat as it may see this as a threat. Use the paintbrush to approach slowly. If it is not aggressing, use the paintbrush to touch the cat gently. Over time (this may be within one visit or over the course of several weeks) you may be able to lessen the distance between your hand and the cat. You can do this by holding the paintbrush with your hand closer and closer to the end as you touch the cat with it. You may also be able to pet the cat gently while you are giving it food. If the cat strikes out when you approach it with the paintbrush, your visits may just involve gentle talk and a human presence in the room at first. These cats are usually designated for visits by CZ2 Lead volunteers only; be sure to talk to staff before you visit.

## **WORKING WITH THE FEAR-AGGRESSIVE CAT**

These cats are very fearful in a new environment. They may hiss or swat if approached too quickly, and may feel the need to defend themselves if they believe they are being threatened or cornered. Some cats become more confident in a week or so, others may take months.

- Begin with sitting at a distance that does not provoke defensive aggression.
- See how s/he responds to gentle conversation or soft humming/singing. You can try reading a book out loud to accustom the cat to the sound of your voice.
- Avoid prolonged eye contact, though you may allow eyes to meet briefly.
- Avoid sudden movements and loud noises.
- You may try tossing treats/kibble in her direction; note the response. If s/he is overtly scared, then do not continue. If no noticeable response, check back later to see if kibble has been eaten. If the cat eats in front of you, this is a good sign!
- Gradually move closer and closer (over the course of days), again remaining at a distance that feels safe for the cat. You may try using toys such as the cat-dancer, a string toy, etc. to attract the interest of the cat.
- Remember, even a fleeting interest in something other than the object of the cat's fear is therapeutic.
- Once you are able to sit very close to the cat, you may attempt to touch him/her.
- Use caution and proceed slowly. Do not push past comfortable limit. Building trust takes time and patience.
- There is a good possibility that the cat will always be timid, at least in new situations with new people. Do not expect a drastic personality change.

## **WORKING WITH FELINE PLAY AGGRESSION**

- Learn to recognize early signs of play aggression – such as dilated pupils, hiding around corners, and crouching. Correct the cat at the first sign of these behaviors. Sometimes a loud clap works to startle the cat.
- Do not use any type of physical punishment (including nose tapping or bottom swatting). This only teaches the cat that you will play back roughly and the cat will respond with intensified violence.
- Any play with hands or other human body parts should be strictly avoided. This includes wrestling with the cat or moving your hand so the cat chases it. Whenever you play with the cat you must use toys. If you do not use toys, the cat will not learn to distinguish your body parts from items of play.

- Play-aggressive cats need consistent handling. If the cat directs its playful behavior towards body parts such as hands and feet, use a verbal correction as the aggressive action is taking place and stop the interaction or play session.
- Try verbal corrections such as “No” in a deep voice, or “Ouch” in a high-pitched voice. If the cat does not respond to verbal correction, clapping, or as a last resort, gently scruffing and removing the cat from you. The latter method usually requires that you withdraw from the cat’s company for a while, as they are liable to repeat the attack.
- No one should let the cat get away with biting hands or any body part. You should only use the most minimal amount of correction needed to obtain the desired response. The point is to interrupt the aggressive event so the cat learns from that experience, but to not be so traumatic that the cat begins to fear you. If done consistently, this action will decrease the probability of the cat exhibiting the inappropriate behavior in the future.
- The cat should be given appropriate outlets for play and plenty of exercise. Provide interactive play at least once per day, preferably 2-3 times. Good toys include cat-dancers, fishing pole toys or string toys. The play-session should include a “cool-down” period at the end where the toy is moving much slower so the cat is not left feeling more frustrated.
- Leave toys that the cat can play with when alone such as balls. Try to vary them to ease boredom.

## OVERSTIMULATION

Overstimulation in cats can manifest itself in a few different ways – there is petting aggression, which is when petting begins to feel irritating to the cat; and there is “busy” behavior – cats that do not settle down, pace the condo, rub frequently on objects and people, and may nip. When visiting these cats it is very important to review the BP and understand the signals that the cat gives when it is overstimulating. These signals may not be the same in every cat: some cats may swish their tails, others may give a cranky meow or head turn, and some may not give many signals at all.

The irritation that cats experience from too much petting can be likened to the feeling you might get when you are being tickled for an extensive period of time, or someone is rubbing your shoulders and it goes from feeling good to feeling irritating.

Start your visit slowly; let the cat approach you. You can hold out your hand to let the cat sniff and rub against your hand. If the cat is not showing any signs of agitation, you can pet the cat a few times. Always limit the amount of petting you give a cat that overstimulates and do not push them past their boundaries. A good approach is a few pets at a time, with breaks in between. As time goes on, you may be able to *gradually* increase the cat’s tolerance for petting. If the cat seems irritated, stop petting immediately. If the cat is on your lap, you can let it sit there, just do not pet him or her. If the cat seems agitated still, even when you are not petting him or her, slowly stand up so the cat falls gently off your lap.

With “busy” cats, pet cautiously and in small amounts. If they want to pace or move away from you, let them; that may be their way of giving themselves a break from the interactions which may be overwhelming them. These cats may also choose to rub against you or your hands to the point where they get worked up and bite, even if you are not petting them. If the cat is rubbing excessively or “twirling”, try to stop the interaction by

distracting the cat with a toy or move your hands where the cat cannot access them (under your legs, fold your arms across your chest). When and if the cat has calmed down, you can try petting, but again, use caution.

Playtime with toys can be a good way to help these cats relax and relieve tension. When a cat is showing signs of irritation, try switching to toys.

If you are bitten or swatted, follow our instructions for correction (see **Appropriate Correction/Response to Aggression**).

## **OVERSTIMULATION/PETTING AGGRESSION**

This is a cat's normal response to petting or handling which the cat finds uncomfortable or feels has gone on too long. A majority of cats exhibit over stimulation or petting aggression to some degree. However, cats vary enormously as to the extent to which they like petting or handling and for how long they tolerate these without finding it aversive. They also vary greatly in the number of warning signals and intensity of their resulting aggressive reaction if warning signals are not seen or are ignored.

- The first thing to keep in mind is that it is very important to avoid getting the cat to the point where it is overstimulated or irritated. **Even if you feel okay with the aggressive behavior, it is still quite stressful to the cat.** It also reinforces the biting behavior habit and may increase aggressive incidents and/or intensity, possibly due to the kitty feeling less trustful of the person pushing them. So, for example, if you know the cat may get overstimulated after about 5 minutes of petting, then only pet the cat for 4 minutes. Or, if you know the cat doesn't like to be petted in a certain way or in a particular area, avoid doing so as much as possible. After a while you can increase petting time a little and see how well the cat tolerates it.
- Observe for signs of impending aggression. Cats almost always give warning signals before biting or scratching. Cats are very subtle in their body posturing by nature, so these signals are sometimes difficult to pick up on at first. Common signals include: tail swishing or flicking, ears flat, staring, quick head turn to watch your hand as you pet, pupil dilation, stillness or tenseness, low growl, and walking away and lying down. Note that re-directed aggression can also be a reason for biting so pay attention to environmental triggers such as loud noises, animals and people present, other cat smells, and changes in the environment.
- Interrupt the behavior at the first sign of any of these signals by withdrawing attention. You can do this by just keeping your hands still by your sides. If the cat is very upset, you may want to walk away from the cat, or if on your lap, stand up slowly and let the cat gently slide off.
- Wait before attempting to pet again. Some cats only take a few minutes to settle down, others can take hours, even a day or two if very upset. At least give a 10 second break. Make sure that all signals of irritation have stopped. If the cat is still worked up, switch to playtime with quiet interactive toys such as feather toys or string. This can help relieve anxiety for the cat, while still allowing you to interact.



- If the cat does nip or scratch during overstimulation, use verbal correction such as telling the cat “No” or “Ouch”, or you can blow lightly in the cat’s face. Correction should only be enough to stop the aggressive action. It should never scare or frighten the cat and cause it to run away. If this happens, say the correction more quietly. A correction that is too harsh may cause the cat to become fearful of you. This can increase the frequency and intensity of the biting behavior.
- Keep in mind that correction won’t have an immediate impact. Some cats take months or even longer to show changes in their behavior. Realistic expectations are that the biting incidents will occur less frequently, and eventually with less intensity. Initially this will be due to watching for signals of irritation, but eventually this may change because of a building of trust and lack of reinforcement. However, most cats will still exhibit this behavior to some degree for their entire lives.

## **ATTENTION SEEKING BEHAVIORS**

Please remember that your interactions with the cats may impact the rest of their lives and contribute to them staying in a happy home or being returned to Cat Town. Consistency is key to working with cats; the Cat Town environment is stressful and confusing for many of the cats. We don’t want to reinforce behavior problems by rewarding them.

Many cats exhibit what we call “attention-seeking behaviors”. This can be meowing at you, trying to get a response, clinging to your legs when you try to leave the enclosure, or nipping for attention when you are ignoring him or her. We often unintentionally encourage this behavior by talking back to the cat or petting the cat when it bats at us. Even negative attention may be perceived by some cats as better than no attention at all.

Attention-seeking behavior is best left ignored. When the behavior is rewarded it will continue. If it is ignored, eventually the cat will give up as it learns that it cannot get attention by meowing/nipping, etc. If a cat is very vocal, **DO NOT** talk back to the cat. It is okay to talk to the cat and praise him when he is being quiet. For nipping behavior, use appropriate correction. If the behavior continues, it may be best to end the visit rather than continually correcting the cat (it may perceive the attention as a reward).

## **APPROPRIATE CORRECTION/RESPONSE TO AGGRESSION**

Cats learn by trial and error. This is an area where we try to ensure consistent messages to the cats – they will learn that much faster. You want to use the least amount of stimulus necessary to interrupt the bad behavior. As we don’t know the cats in our care very well, this means starting with very minimal correction and working your way up slowly. The corrective stimulus should not be so much as to scare the cat – then you have defeated your purpose and contributed to the beginning of a new problem – fear of people.

**Any type of physical punishment is recognized by all leading cat behavior experts as detrimental and counterproductive and should be avoided.**

First, try to avoid any situation likely to trigger an aggressive reaction – for example, if a cat is known to overstimulate, limit petting so that the cat does not get agitated to the point that it wants to bite.

If you are bitten, your response can determine if the attack escalates or ends. Your response will also determine if the behavior will improve or worsen. Consistency is important. Understand that it may take a little while to “train yourself” to act appropriately in these instances. Use only humane correction: withdrawing attention, saying NO – loudly if necessary or clapping your hands.

### **Don't**

- React with quick jerk away from the cat (this is how prey responds to an attack – this can trigger continuing aggression).
- Have a big reaction such as screaming and jumping (this may make the cat think you intend to attack him back which could increase the aggression).
- Use excessive correction that makes the cat run and hide or attack – use only enough correction to interrupt the behavior.
- React in anger – this can cause fearfulness and stress in the cat, can escalate the attack, and most certainly will not improve the behavior!
- Make “cat” noises – hissing or meowing at the cat.

### **Do**

- Use correction that causes the cat to stop the aggressive behavior and make sure to calmly withdraw from the cat.
- Use appropriate correction techniques: Verbally (a high-pitched “OUCH”/“NO” sternly).
- Make sure that correction techniques are not causing the cat to fear you. Also, make sure that other cats in the room are not negatively affected by the correction techniques used on the play aggressive cat.

**Unacceptable correction** includes tapping on the nose, pushing, scruffing or pinning down the cats, tapping with objects (such as a newspaper). This is true for kittens and adult cats. Spray water bottles should not be used without prior explicit permission of the Cat Behavior staff.

**If one of our cats bites you and breaks skin, be sure to report it to the staff ASAP.**

## **“The Rules” for CZ2**

1. The cats are fed every morning and evening. Some cats may be ill and require special diets so please read the notes or check with staff to make sure it's okay for the cat you are visiting to receive treats.
2. Feel free to bring cat toys for your visit. Do not leave ribbons, string, toys with feathers, or other objects the cats can swallow or choke on in the condo when you leave.

3. Do not punish the cats. Punishment is counterproductive and will only cause a cat to fear people. **Never tap a cat on the nose or bat a cat for any reason**, even if the cat bites or swats at you. Use only humane correction techniques if bitten or scratched. If you hit or mistreat an animal you will be dismissed from your volunteer position.
4. Do not play with cats or kittens with your hands or other body parts. You must only use toys for play.
5. **Wash and/or sanitize your hands between each visit** to prevent the spread of any disease. Use the antiseptic hand cleanser, or wash your hands thoroughly with hot water and soap.
6. Do not let cats out of their spaces.
7. You **must** read the visit notes in the Cat-a-Log on **every CZ2 cat you intend to visit before entering their space**.
8. You must log your visits in the CZ2 Cat-a-Log after every visit.
9. Write-ups for visits should be appropriate to be read by the public. They should include information on the cat's behavior during the visit – adopters may read visits before finalizing an adoption.
10. Only visit cats with skill levels you have been trained for unless accompanied by a staff member or a volunteer who is trained to show those cats.
11. Do not show any cats to the public (including friends and other volunteers) unless you are trained to do so.
12. Do not offer any behavior advice to the public unless you have been trained and approved to do so by the Cat Town staff.
13. If you are seriously scratched or bitten, please speak with a Cat Town Supervisor. Notify staff of any injuries or emergencies (in people or cats).
14. Negative comments about a cat can deprive a cat of a home. Every cat needs and deserves a home just as much as the next. Therefore, we ask that you not voice negative comments about cats to the public or potential adopters.
15. Visiting “CZ2 Lead Volunteers Only” cats is not automatic and may require additional training.
16. Always handle the cats appropriately and humanely. Do not pick up the cats unless it is necessary.
17. Keep this area clear of food and drink. **CLEAN UP AFTER YOURSELF!!!**
18. Please express any concerns about staff, the other volunteers, or the public with CZ2 Staff directly.