



Volunteer Cat 2.0 Handbook

HSMC Cat Training 2.0

Program Requirements

- Volunteer application (Level 1)
- Basic Volunteer Orientation (Level 1)
- Minimum of 300 hours service time and be age 18
- Pass the HSMC Cat 101 (yellow paw)
- Buy and maintain your own clicker

Program Overview

Cat Training 2.0 is designed to prepare volunteers to safely and confidently interact with cats in a shelter environment. This program focuses on risk awareness, reading behavior, and preventing injury to volunteers, staff, visitors, and cats.

Volunteers are expected to use this knowledge to:

- Prevent bites and scratches
- Recognize early warning signs of stress or aggression
- Create a calm, low-stress environment for cats
- Make safe decisions at all times

SAFETY FIRST: CORE RULES

- **Always assess before interacting**
- **Never assume a cat is friendly**
- **If unsure—DO NOT engage**
- **Respect all warning signs immediately**
- **Your safety comes before interaction**

Understanding Cat Behavior = Preventing Injury

The #1 way to stay safe is to understand what a cat is feeling **before** it reacts.

Cats communicate through:

- Body position
- Tail movement
- Ear position
- Eyes
- Vocalizations

Important: No single signal guarantees safety. Always look at the **full picture + environment (context)**.

Cat Paw Prints

	Cat - A level two volunteer has completed at least 10 hours and must pass Cat 101 to advance. They have a moderate list of activities and may interact with certain animals. Access to adoption rooms.
	Cat - (Age 18+) The level three volunteer has completed at least 300 service hours and must pass Dog or Cat 101 to advance. The Volunteer Coordinator must recommend a volunteer for advancement to this level. Eligible to take Cat 2.0. Given more activities. More than 50% of time must be logged in cat care positions. Access to adoption rooms & cages with approval
	Cat - (Age 18+) The level four volunteer has completed at least 1,000 hours of volunteering. Must pass Fear Free Shelter Training to advance. The Shelter Operations Manager must recommend a volunteer for advancement to this level. Given more activities. More than 50% of time must be logged in cat care positions. Access to adoption rooms, cages & seclusion room with approval.
	Cat - (Age 18+) The level five volunteer has completed 2,000+ hours. Must pass specific ASPCA Pro classes to advance. The Executive Director must recommend a volunteer for advancement to this level. Given more activities. More than 50% of the time must be logged in cat-handling positions. Access to adoption rooms, cages, seclusion room, and assisting staff in the cat hallway with approval.
	Cat - (Age 18+) The level five volunteer has completed at least 2,000 hours of service. Must pass specific Maddie's University Classes & ASPCA Pro classes to advance. The Executive Director must recommend a volunteer for advancement to this level. Given more activities. More than 50% of time must be logged in cat care positions. Access to adoption rooms, cages, seclusion room, assisting staff in the cat hallway, and A/B room with approval.
	All Volunteers – (Loyalty Paw) This paw is for volunteers who have served the HSMC for 1 year or more. 1 star per year.

Reading the Cat: SAFETY BREAKDOWN

1. Body Position (Posture)

Relaxed / Safer to Interact

- Stretched out body
- Loose posture
- Facing you calmly

HIGH RISK (Do NOT engage)

- Arched back
- Puffing up (piloerection)
- Trying to look bigger

This cat is **fearful and may strike**

Caution / Do Not Approach Quickly

- Crouched low to the ground
- Frozen when you approach
- Body turned sideways (ready to flee)

2. The “Venus Cat Trap” (Major Safety Risk)

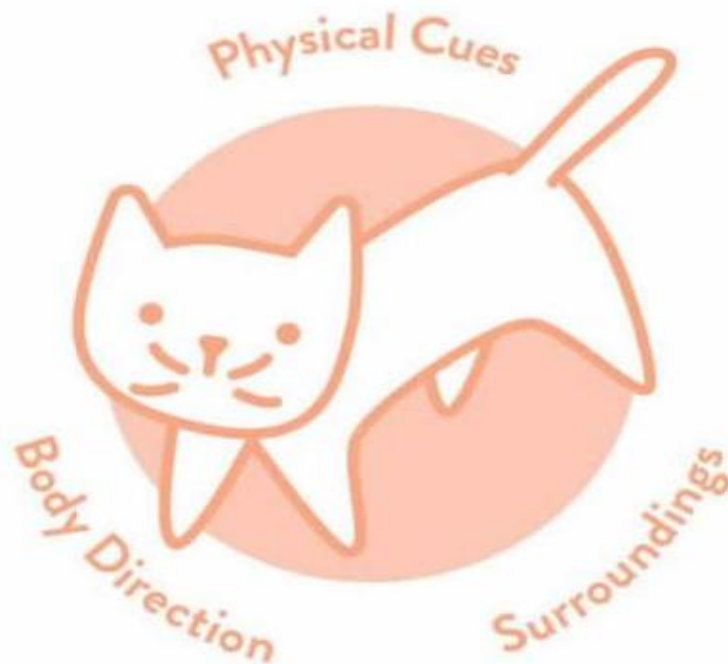
A cat lying on its back exposing its belly:

- Does not mean “pet my belly”
- Can mean the cat trusts you or is preparing to defend itself

Many bites and scratches occur in this situation.

Rule: Never touch a cat’s belly unless clearly known and approved.

CONTEXT COMES FIRST



» Cats forecast their intentions by pointing their body in the direction they are likely to go. «

KEY BODY LANGUAGE INDICATORS





Confident



Potentially Aggressive

3. Tail Signals

Safer Signals

- Tail upright indicates confidence and friendliness

Warning Signs

- Tail flicking indicates irritation and is a signal to stop interaction
- Tail low or tucked indicates fear

High Risk

- Puffed tail indicates fear or aggression

TAIL AS A MOOD BAROMETER



- » High
- » Friendly
- » Vibrating

Low «
Anxious «
Small Target «



- » Upset
- » Back Off
- » Lack of Receptivity



4. Ears

Neutral

- Forward-facing

High Risk

- Flattened (“airplane ears”)
This indicates fear or aggression.

Warning

- Slightly turned back

TAKE A HINT

EARS



EYES



» When a cat trusts you, they might blink at you slowly. A slowly blinking cat is usually a comfortable one. «

When a cat's pupils are large and dilated, that means it's stimulated. Dilated pupils can indicate fear, excitement, or anger.



When a cat's pupils are narrow and constricted, that could indicate aggression. Consider the context to decide.

5. Eyes

Safe / Relaxed

- Slow blinking, you may slowly blink back

Aroused State

- Dilated pupils. This can indicate play, fear, or aggression, depending on context

Dilated pupils mean the cat is stimulated



Afraid



Hunting

6. Whiskers

- Pulled back indicates fear
- Forward indicates alertness or confidence

7. Vocal Warnings (Escalation Signs)

Cats give warnings before acting. These must be respected.

Progression:

1. Growl – warning to back away
2. Hiss – stop interaction immediately
3. Yowl – high risk
4. Shriek – imminent action (bite or scratch likely)

Critical Rule:

If a cat is hissing, growling, or showing fear, stop interaction immediately.

VOCALIZATIONS

DISCOMFORT SERIES



GROWL

» A growling cat is warning you to back off. «



» Hissing indicates that a cat is feeling threatened. «



HISS



» A cat that yowls feels that they're out of options. «

YOWL



OTHER COMMON SOUNDS

TRILL



» Friendly, familial greeting

PURR



» Usually pleasure, sometimes pain

CHIRP



» Excitement and/or frustration

MEOW



» Excitement and/or frustration

BODY SHAPE & POSTURE



» When a cat is fearful or angry, they'll often make themselves as big as possible in various ways. «

» If a cat is pointing their body and head toward you, they may be receptive to your advances. «



» The crouched-down body position enables the cat to spring off, should they feel the need. «

Context = Safety

Always consider:

- Is the cat cornered?
- Is the cat in a confined or dark space?
- Is the cat unfamiliar with you?
- Is the environment loud or stressful?

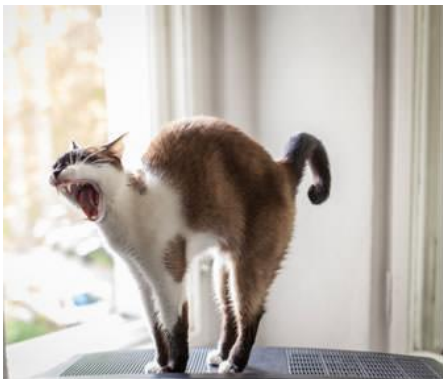
A stressful environment increases the risk of injury.

Common Volunteer Mistakes (Safety Risks)

- Reaching into hiding spaces
- Forcing interaction
- Ignoring tail or ear signals
- Touching sensitive areas (belly, feet)
- Moving too quickly
- Assuming all cats enjoy handling

How to Safely Interact with Cats

- Move slowly and calmly
- Allow the cat to approach you
- Continuously observe body language
- Stop at the first sign of stress
- Use a quiet voice and gentle movements



Relaxed stretch



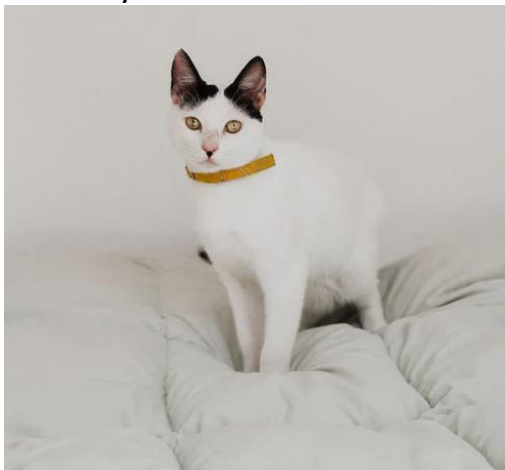
Frightened

When Not to Interact

Do not interact if the cat is:

- Hissing or growling
- Flattening ears
- Crouched and frozen
- Swatting or attempting to strike
- Hiding and unwilling to engage

Walk away and notify staff if needed.



Offset body orientation:
uncertain / shy



Direct body orientation:
confident / relaxed

Why This Matters

Unsafe handling can result in:

- Volunteer injury (bites and scratches)
- Increased stress for cats
- Behavioral decline
- Reduced adoptability

Safe handling leads to:

- Calmer cats
- Better interactions
- Higher adoption success

Putting It All Together

Cats have earned a reputation for being hard to read, but it's not their fault – they communicate differently than humans. They'll tell you whether they're comfortable with their posture, tails, ears, eyes, whiskers, and vocalizations. The main takeaway is that a cat's body language and behaviors should be looked at as a part of a single big picture. By using the context of the entire situation, trying to see the situation from the cat's point of view, and looking for subtle cues in body language, you'll have an excellent chance at understanding your feline friends.