**Feline Adoptability Guidelines**

# What Are They and Why Do We Have Them?

The Adoptability Guidelines describe what we believe a cat needs to be able to do, from a behavioral perspective, to successfully function in specific contexts as a companion in a pet home. Each Guideline names acceptable problem behaviors, categorized as fear, arousal, and aggression, that a cat might show in specific contexts.

The purpose of the Adoptability Guidelines is to help our teams achieve as much consistency as possible regarding the pathway decisions made and the cats placed in our communities. As behavior staff continually collect and review behavior information gathered from multiple sources throughout an animal’s stay, the Adoptability Guidelines do two main things: 1) inform contributions to pathway planning and 2) help set goals and benchmarks to track a cat’s progress in treatment.

The Adoptability Guidelines are meant to be just that: guides. Consider them to be guardrails that provide a structure for behavior staff to assess the behavioral adoptability of a cat alongside their organization’s behavioral capacity for care. They are not fixed criteria, nor are they meant to replace the use of behavioral expertise. Behavior is complex and dynamic, and animals are unique individuals. Behavior staff should adhere to the general philosophy of the Adoptability Guidelines, while also using sound judgement about each individual animal.

# Acceptable Problem Behaviors

* Acceptable problem behaviors reflect the behavior of the cat when they are a) handled or managed by a typical adopter, not a behavior expert, b) without the aid of a helper cat, and c) without the aid of a familiar person in unfamiliar person Adoptability Guidelines.
* The Adoptability Guidelines are written in such a way as to assume that if a cat displays a problem behavior, the cat displays only one problem behavior. Consider the overall picture of the animal. If a cat displays multiple problem behaviors, even if each individual problem is considered “acceptable” on its own, the overall picture may make the cat unsuitable for adoption. When a cat displays a combination of acceptable fear, arousal, or aggression in a single context (e.g., fear and arousal in Handling) or acceptable problem behaviors in multiple contexts (e.g., acceptable arousal in Social Behavior with People & in Handling), behavior staff must apply their expertise to decide whether adoption is the most appropriate outcome for the cat.

# How to Use the Adoptability Guidelines

* These guidelines are intended for use with cats 8 weeks and older.
* After gathering all the available behavior information you have on a cat (e.g., previous history, behavior in shelter, behavior during medical examination, and behavior evaluation), decide if they meet the Adoptability Guidelines. Again, consider the overall behavioral picture: how does the cat *typically* behave? In other words, single, standalone instances of unacceptable fear, arousal or aggression in unusual circumstances should not necessarily be weighted heavily, unless the behavior was truly egregious. If staff are unsure what is typical for a particular cat, then more information needs to be gathered. For cats who have bitten, good judgement should be used to infer whether biting would be a typical response if the cat were to be handled and managed by a typical adopter.
* Use the Adoptability Guidelines and the *Treatment Eligibility Chart\** to “sort” cats into pathway planning categories as they make their way through our system:
	+ Further information gathering is needed
	+ Meets Adoptability Guidelines and is eligible for placement
	+ Doesn’t meet the Adoptability Guidelines but is eligible for behavioral treatment
	+ Doesn’t meet the Adoptability Guidelines, but may be eligible for alternative placement, such as a barn or working cat placement
	+ Doesn’t meet the Adoptability Guidelines, and humane euthanasia is the appropriate outcome
* Use the Adoptability Guidelines to track cats’ progress in treatment. If a cat does not meet the Adoptability Guidelines but the *Treatment Eligibility Chart* indicates the problem behavior is eligible for behavior treatment, the Adoptability Guidelines can serve as behavior modification goals. Set progress benchmarks with the Adoptability Guidelines in mind.
* The Adoptability Guidelines are supported by additional behavioral tools:
	+ Adoptability Guidelines refer to fear, arousal, and aggression in terms of severity (i.e., mild, moderate, and severe). See our standardized *Fear, Aggression, and Arousal Scales* for comprehensive definitions.
	+ Definitions of select Guideline terminology (e.g., familiar person, unfamiliar person) are in the *Glossary of Behavior Terms.*
	+ If the cat’s behavior does not meet the Adoptability Guidelines, see the *Treatment Eligibility Chart* to decide if the cat is eligible for treatment. If the problem behavior is aggression, use of the *Feline Risk Assessment* may be appropriate.
	+ Always use the Adoptability Guidelines alongside the *Holistic Quality of Life Assessment* that measures a cat’s well-being in their current circumstances and helps us decide whether a cat is likely to have a good quality of life in an adopter’s home.
* There is no definitive time for how quickly a cat may meet the Adoptability Guidelines. Some cats may adjust to the shelter within the first 24 hours, and it is clear they meet the Adoptability Guidelines. Other cats may need more time to settle in before knowing whether they meet the Adoptability Guidelines.
* Research suggests that many cats have higher levels of acute stress during the first two weeks in a shelter when compared to cats who have been in the shelter longer than two weeks. We do know some cats take as few as five days or as much as five weeks for their stress level to decrease. This means some cats will need time to acclimate to the shelter environment before determining if they met the Adoptability Guidelines. If a cat is experiencing stress in the shelter environment that is potentially affecting their behavior, they should be given up to two weeks to settle in before determining if they meet the Adoptability Guidelines.
	+ For cats who are exhibiting signs of fear, anxiety, or stress that is affecting their behavior and/or quality of life, consider placing them in an alternative housing option (e.g., office, communal cat space, in an experienced foster home) and, if possible, give them at least two weeks to settle into this environment before determining if they meet Adoptability Guidelines and selecting their pathway.
* The Adoptability Guidelines are a piece of an integrated, collaborative decision-making process. A cat may meet Adoptability Guidelines, and behavior staff may recommend placement, but because of a combination of behavior and medical problems, a unified panel of decision-makers may decide that euthanasia is the most appropriate outcome. Alternatively, a cat might not meet all Adoptability Guidelines, but because of other factors (e.g., the cat’s physical attributes or age), the panel may agree to place the animal.

# Exceptions, Caveats, & Gray Areas

There *will* be exceptions. This is expected and okay. Here are some examples:

* A cat doesn’t meet the Handling Adoptability Guidelines but doesn’t have any other problem behaviors and we have reason to believe that the behavior is specific to the shelter environment. Such a cat might be prioritized for an alternative housing option, such as an office or habitat space, or presentation to adopters, a foster “test drive,” or placement from foster, or transfer to another organization with a more appropriate environment for that cat.
* There may be some cats who do not meet the Adoptability Guidelines or Treatment Eligibility Criteria but could have a good quality of life if placed in an alternative environment, like a barn or working cat location, if such options exist.
* If kittens under 12 weeks of age do not meet the Adoptability Guidelines, interventions should be tried before making a final determination on their outcome.

There are some things the Adoptability Guidelines don’t cover. Here are some examples:

* *Behavior we can’t assess in a shelter:* Examples include litter box use in a home environment, excessive meowing, and behavior around children.
	+ Litter box issues are complex and can be environment specific. Adopters of cats reported to have a history of not using the litter box should be provided with litter box best practices and tips that will set the cat up for success. If a cat is having consistent litter box issues in multiple environments outside of the shelter, despite behavioral and medical intervention, alternative placement or euthanasia may be appropriate.
* *Compatibility with other pets in the home*: Some great companions aren’t compatible with other animals or would not permit a good quality of life for resident pets (e.g., a young cat who persistently tries to play with other animals and doesn’t respond to their signals or corrections). Some may also display redirected aggression toward people when in the presence of other animals, although they make acceptable pets if placed in a home without exposure to other animals.
* *Transitional Stress*: Cats may be prescribed psychoactive medication to help them adjust to an unfamiliar environment and/or to facilitate treatment. Using psychoactive medication is acceptable, and often encouraged, for helping cats cope during stressful situations or transitions. It may be appropriate to send cats to their adoptive home on this medication temporarily to help them adjust to their new home.

Of course, the Adoptability Guidelines are not a crystal ball and cannot account for every possible behavior. Although they can help us make sound decisions that are consistent across the organization, we acknowledge that we can’t predict behavior perfectly. Instead, we ask behavior staff to do their best to assess behavior objectively and compassionately, making decisions with each animal’s quality of life, adopter quality of life, and community safety in mind.

# Behavior Adoptability Guidelines

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| **Social Behavior with People** |

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| **Adoptability Guidelines**(What must the cat be able to do?) | The cat shows that they have developed a social relationship with at least one person. (E.g., chirping, displaying tail up, approaching the person to greet when they enter the room, positioning the body near or on the familiar person, soliciting attention in the form of rubbing or head butting.) |

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|  | **Acceptable** | **Unacceptable** |
| **Fear** | * Mild to moderate fear when approached by a familiar person if they return to a neutral or relaxed state once person greets them
* Mild fear when interacting with a familiar person, but they should be neutral, at worst, most of the time
* Mild to moderate fear in the presence of unfamiliar people
* Avoidance or lack of affiliative/friendly behavior with unfamiliar people
 | * Consistently displaying mild fear when interacting with a familiar person with no signs of social behavior or relaxation
* Consistent, sustained moderate fear around familiar people most of the time
* Consistent, severe fear in the presence of people

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| **Aggression** -or- **Arousal** | * Play aggression with predictable trigger(s) that can be avoided or managed by a typical adopter
* Brief warning vocalizations (e.g., hissing and/or growling) without lunging or charging
* Orienting mouth toward, lightly mouthing, batting, or swatting a person with light pressure or inhibited biting or nipping; behavior is predictable, and the trigger(s) can be avoided or managed by a typical adopter
 | * Consistent or frequent spitting or yowling directed toward people
* Uninhibited biting
* Unpredictable or unavoidable swatting or biting
* Lunging or charging toward a person
* Chasing or ambushing with biting or swatting with more than light pressure; behavior prevents people from moving normally around the cat
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| **Handling** |

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| **Adoptability Guidelines**(What must the cat be able to do?) | Cat exhibits relaxed body language when touched by a familiar person in non-sensitive areas (chest, chin, shoulders, head).Cat can be picked up briefly and/or lured into a carrier by a familiar person without causing or trying to cause harm to the person or themselves.If cat requires routine maintenance of their haircoat, they tolerate being brushed by a familiar person without the use of psychoactive medications. If cat occasionally needs small mats cut out of their hair, this can be done by a familiar person and, if needed, with the help of psychoactive medications. Cat can be handled safely for medical prevention and treatment with the help of a familiar person and/or psychoactive medications. |

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|  | **Acceptable** | **Unacceptable** |
| **Fear** | * Mild fear
* Brief, moderate fear when initially touched by a familiar person
* Mild or moderate fear when touched by an unfamiliar person
* Moderate fear when picked up by a familiar person if they recover quickly when put down
* If no familiar person is available to get the cat into a carrier for transport, the cat must be able to be placed in or lured into a carrier by an unfamiliar, experienced handler
* If restraint or handling in a veterinary context provokes a severe fear response, the cat must be able to tolerate minimally invasive handling with the help of a familiar person; alternatively, *if medical treatment or diagnostics is infrequent*, sedation is acceptable provided the cat is healthy enough to tolerate it
 | * Consistent, moderate fear when touched by a familiar person with no signs of relaxation or returning to a neutral state within 30 seconds
* Severe fear when petted or groomed
* Severe fear when picked up by a familiar person and there are no other reasonable options for easily moving/transporting the cat
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| **Aggression -**or- **Arousal** | * Orienting mouth toward, mouthing, nipping, or inhibited biting; batting or swatting with light pressure when touched, as long as the cat does not consistently engage in the behavior or resume the behavior after being interrupted
* Hissing and/or growling when touched by an unfamiliar person
* Occasional, brief hissing and/or growling when touched by a person unexpectedly while aroused or focused on another stimulus, as long as the cat does not escalate or come forward toward person
* If restraint or handling in a veterinary context provokes an aggressive response, the cat must be able to tolerate minimally invasive handling with the help of a familiar person; alternatively, *if the need for medical treatment or diagnostics is infrequent*, sedation is acceptable provided the cat is healthy enough to tolerate it
* Above noted behaviors are predictable and the trigger(s) can be avoided or managed by a typical adopter
 | * The behaviors listed to the left under ‘acceptable aggression or arousal’ do not have a predictable trigger and cannot be avoided or managed by a typical adopter
* Consistent or frequent hissing and/or growling (defensive aggression) when touched by a familiar person
* Consistent or frequent spitting or yowling directed toward people
* Unpredictable or unmanageable biting or swatting with greater than light pressure
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