

My Adopted Cat Is Afraid of Me

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger gives tips for getting cat used to his favorite person.

By Marilyn Krieger

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Q: I recently adopted a 3-year-old Maine Coon named Paulie from my neighbor. Paulie lived under her bed for two years because there were two dogs who terrorized him. I've only had him a month and a half and we've made progress. He's very affectionate and gets on well with my other cats — especially my male cat, Dash. They race around the house together and curl up together. Our problem is that during the day, Paulie refuses to come out from under my bed when I'm there. So, I've been going to bed at 7 for the past month so that he will come out.

A: Before I address your question, I want to thank you for rescuing Paulie. Because of your kindheartedness, he will be able to live a happy life, free from stress.

It's easy to understand why Paulie doesn't feel safe to venture out from under the bed while you are in the room with him. He's lived most of his life in terror, seeking refuge from the two dogs by hiding under a bed. It will take time and patience, but eventually Paulie will feel safe and secure during the day in the rest of the house.

You want Paulie to see you as the provider of everything wonderful, from food and treats to play. Start by putting boxes and paper bags with no handles around his room. Turn them so that they face walls or furniture. As Paulie starts to feel a little braver, these will provide him safe havens to go when he starts venturing out from under the bed.

It is important to frequently visit him in his room during the day when he's hiding. Make sure you are always armed with special treats that he adores. Whenever you visit him, lob a little treat under the bed to him. Don't try to pet him or try to get him out from under the bed. Instead, sit either on the floor or on a chair at a distance from the bed. Bring a good book with you and sit and read it, occasionally tossing a couple of treats into his hiding place. After he regularly eats the treats, you can start throwing the food a little farther from him and closer to the entrance of his sanctuary. When he is brave enough to come near the entrance of his hiding place, put the treats in a box positioned next to the bed. Once he is comfortable with eating treats in the box you can work with him to eat out in the open. The process may take a few days, weeks or months.

Since he enjoys playing, become his play buddy, encouraging him to play by using a fishing pole toy or a feather wand toy. Good times to play are in the early morning and in the evening when he's typically the most active. Note: Place the fishing pole toys out his reach when you are not there to supervise the play.

Consistency and schedules will also help Paulie become a more secure cat. Schedule the play sessions and his meals at the same times every day so he looks forward to both the feedings and interacting with you, his favorite person.