

My Cat Has Developed a Fear of Visitors

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger, CCBC, discusses ways to help kitty handle houseguests again.

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Q: I have had my cats, Picolo and Sensi, for just over a year. Picolo used to be the first to greet visitors, parade around the front room and play with our guests.

About six months ago we had guests under the age of 3 who had no experience with cats. Unfortunately, when they crossed paths with Picolo, they began screaming, resulting in Picolo running for cover. Since this incident, whenever we have visitors, Picolo goes into hiding and will not interact and is terrified, to the point that at feeding time I have to take the bowl to her hiding place so that she will eat. If she is outside when guests are visiting, she will not come inside on her own.

Is there something that you could recommend for us to help ease her anxiety?

A: Cats can easily be frightened by children screaming. A child screaming can sound like an animal in pain and it can startle a cat who hasn't been around children. Unfortunately, Picolo's experience was so traumatizing, that she now has a fear association with anyone she doesn't know. With patience, time and delicious treats, Picolo's fears and anxieties probably can be gradually overcome.

I recommend that initially you limit your houseguests to a couple of cat-centric adults who will visit you frequently. It's important not to overwhelm Picolo with too many strangers at the same time.

Before your guest arrives, place Picolo in a sanctuary room. This room should be a room she loves to hang out in and is quiet and free of people. There should be a cat box, comfortable place to sleep, toys, water, cat treats in a secure container and a couple of chairs in the room. Additionally, provide Picolo safe places to both retreat to and climb on, such as cat trees, tall shelves, paper bags with the handles cut off, or a box laid on its side.

When your guest arrives ask him to quietly go with you into Picolo's room and sit down in one chair while you sit in the other. Calmly engage your friend in conversation while he occasionally tosses a yummy treat toward Picolo's hiding spot. If Picolo eats the treats, your friend can gradually decrease the distance of the throw so Picolo comes a little closer to eat the treats. If Picolo stays hidden, then your friend can continue to lob treats toward her. Do your best to keep your conversation soft and low. Loud laughter at this stage will startle Picolo. Also, your guest shouldn't approach Picolo. When Picolo is feeling secure, she will initiate the contact. Within a few visits Picolo should start to overcome her fear and come out to eat her treats. After she starts accepting your friend's presence, you can bring another friend over for a visit, going through the same routine as before. After Picolo has overcome some of her fear, you and your guests can move back into the living room, keeping the door to Picolo's room open so that she has the option of venturing out to interact with you and your friends. When Picolo does venture out, make sure your guests reward her with treats.

Since Picolo has been severely traumatized, she will need to be gradually and patiently acquainted to strangers. Get-togethers with lots of people and children will be frightening experiences for her for awhile. If you are having children over or lots of guests, put Picolo in her room and make it off-limits to all but the quiet guests who are willing to sit with Picolo for a little while and help her overcome her fears by tossing her treats and talking quietly with her.