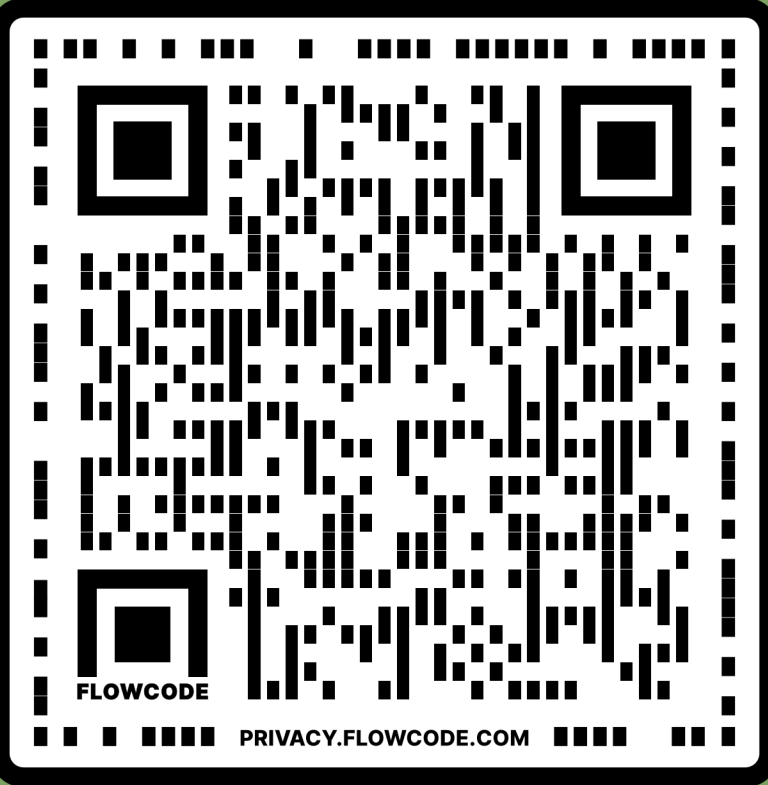


A Guide to Managing Aggressive Shelter Cats

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Introduction

Cats confined to small kennels and deprived of socialization by humans and/or other cats are likely to suffer from severe fear, anxiety, stress (FAS), and frustration. This is often displayed by a range of aggression or other “problematic behaviors.” These behaviors make them harder to place in new homes and greatly increase a cat’s risk for euthanasia.

Most socialized cats (i.e., owner-surrendered vs. unsocialized stray) find human interaction rewarding and it can greatly decrease their stress levels.

To improve their welfare and increase positive outcomes, these cats must be provided with positive human socialization and out-of-kennel enrichment as part of their daily routine starting at the time of intake.



“Mia” went from FAS 4/5 to FAS 0/5 after four sessions

Objectives

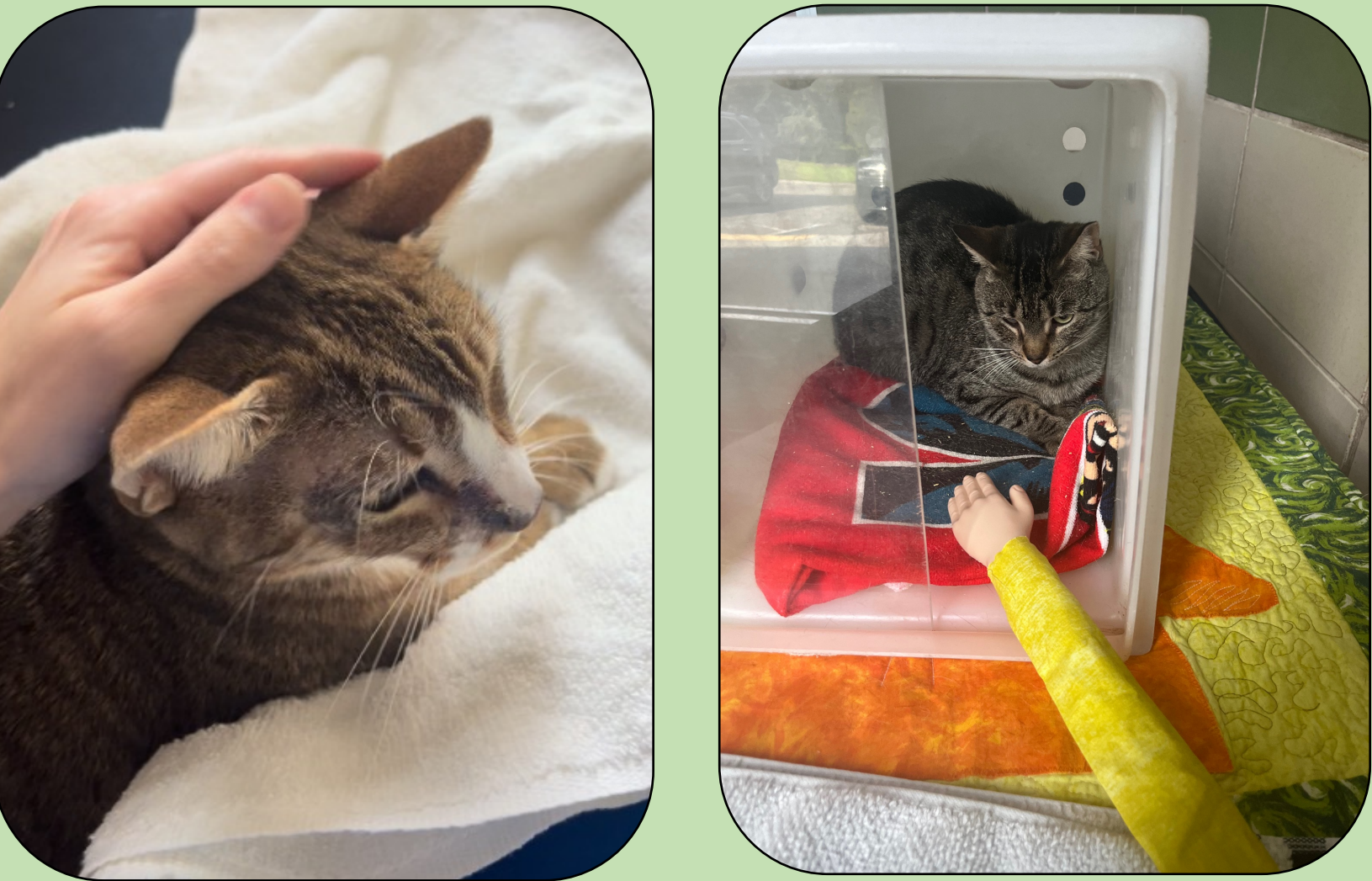
- Provide daily, out-of-kennel time with positive human socialization
- Decrease overall FAS and frustration levels
- Increase positive outcomes for fearful shelter cats
- Demonstrate how to handle and gentle aggressive and fearful shelter cats

Methods

- I assessed cats from inside their primary kennel and scored them from 0–5 on the FAS chart
- I then used fear-free handling techniques appropriate for their FAS level to safely remove them from their kennel and transport them to the enrichment room
- Once in the room, I used gentling techniques to socialize with the cat for 30–90 minutes a day 3–4 times a week during their shelter stay
- I recorded their FAS level before, during, and after each session to keep track of their progress



Above: “Ink” went from Offensive FAS 5/5 to FAS 0/5 after 2 sessions.
Below: “Corey” went from Defensive FAS 5/5 to FAS 1/5 after only 1 session.



Fear-Free Techniques:
(Clockwise) Gentling around the cat’s neck, fake hand to socialize cats with severe FAS, using towels to “burrito” cats.

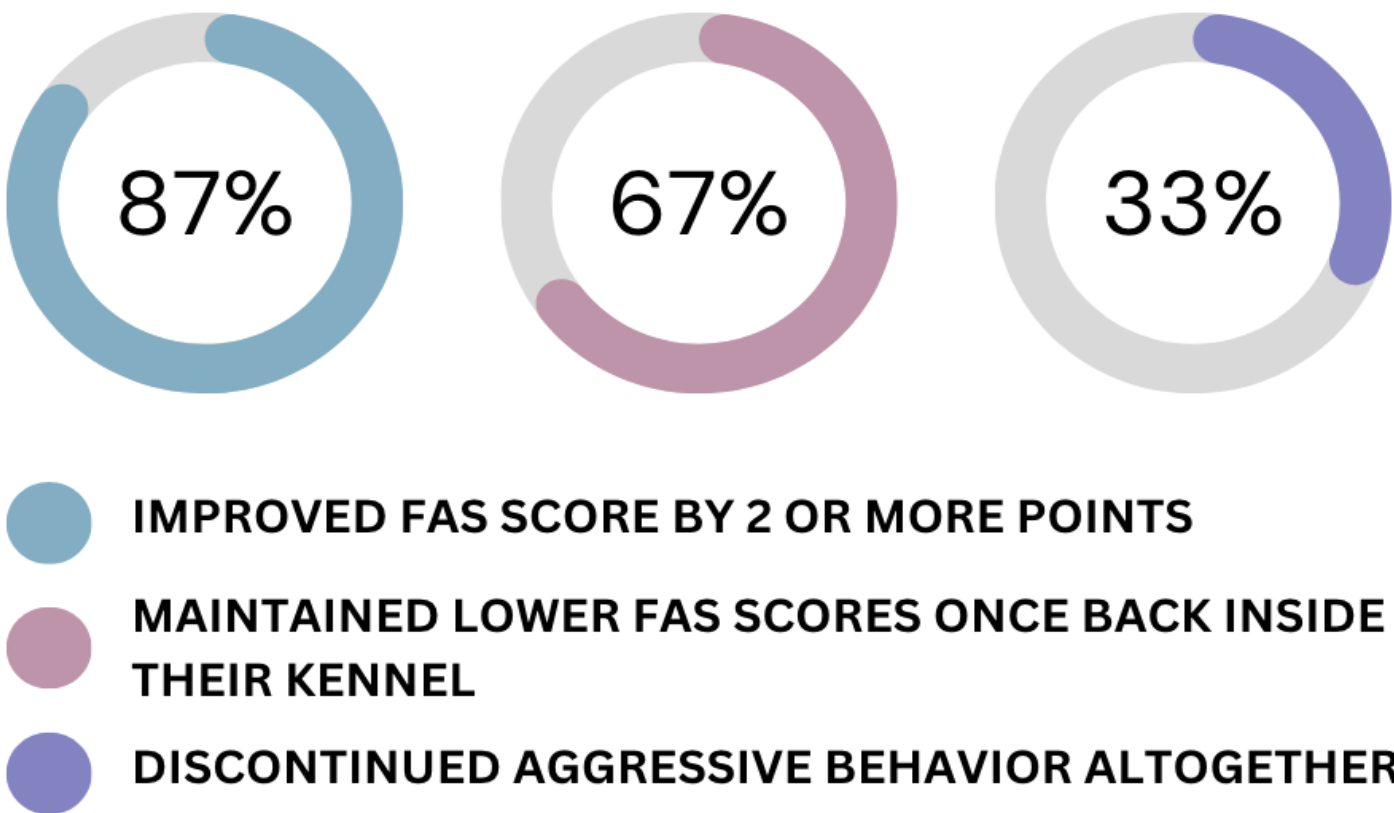


Gentling: *verb* The act of softly speaking to and petting a cat around the neck and head in a calming manner

Feline FAS Chart



Results



Discussion

Shelter cats, especially those with previous owners, greatly benefit from positive human interaction for socialization and enrichment. However, inadequate feline housing is a major issue in shelters. It is crucial for cats to have daily out-of-kennel time to reduce stress, improve their overall welfare, and increase their chances of adoption. Compared to dogs, cats tend to show higher levels of aggression when under stress, which often leads to misunderstandings about their behavior. Unfortunately, many shelter staff members are not trained to handle aggressive cats, resulting in these cats being left untouched by humans for months. Proper training and timely implementation of techniques are crucial for success in improving the lives of shelter cats.

A word about community cats: Many shelters intake stray or community cats for various reasons. These cats can exhibit extremely aggressive and dangerous behaviors and no amount of gentling can make them a socialized cat. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to recognize that these cats do best as outdoor, community cats and should be returned to the field as soon as possible.