Taking on a visually impaired cat – things to consider

This article is adapted from one written by veterinary nurse and animal trainer Linda Ryan who adapted her home for a partially-sighted cat. Many of the considerations follow principles for taking on any cat with a sensory impairment, such as a deaf cat.

Blindness or visual impairment in cats can occur for a number of reasons, such as illness or injury or may be congenital (present at birth). Sight problems can come on suddenly or may have a slow onset. Cats which have lost vision slowly tend to cope far better with the environment (sometimes owners are not even aware of the seriousness of the condition). Those that lose sight quickly, may become distressed and disorientated, perhaps falling off or bumping into things and may show a loss of confidence, may withdraw and hide, or may seek extra attention and reassurance from their owners. It will all depend on the individual and how well the cat can manage in the environment in which it finds itself, and whether it also feels unwell or is dealing with pain caused by related conditions.

Taking on a blind or visually-impaired cat is a big consideration that requires thought and careful planning. However, in the right home and with the right care, blind and visually-impaired cats should be able to have full and happy lives. Like sighted cats, they will have to learn all about their new environments and how to navigate them confidently, how to keep safe and how to get what they need/want. Additionally, the transition to their new home needs to be as smooth and stress-free as possible.

PREPARATION AND PLANNING

Prepare one room initially with everything the cat needs
Initially, it is best to keep the cat at floor level, so resources (all those things the cat needs such as bed, litter tray, food, water etc.) can be arranged on the floor, including a bed/box to hide in or sit on. Scratching needs can initially be met with a horizontal or wedge-style scratching block. Toys can be infused with fresh catnip to provide sensory enrichment (if the cat responds to it – not all cats react to catnip).

Keep things consistent
Keep all the resources for the cat in the same place so the cat learns where they are. This includes food, water, hiding and sleeping areas, litter trays and scratching posts/blocks.

Gradual widening of the cat’s world
When the cat shows signs that it is ready (eg, confidently trying to follow you out of the room), it is time to let the cat explore the rest of the house gradually. The door to the cat’s room should always be left open so it can go back in there if it needs to at any time. This process should be done slowly to let the cat get used to the sounds and smells of the rest of the house. This can be achieved by:
- Opening the door a crack, and then a bit more using a wedge.
- Using a baby gate across the doorway.

Ensure other areas have resources
Provide extra of what the cat needs around the house, as it is opened up to it – once it knows where to find things and how to get back and forth to them, this can
be scaled back.

**Be consistent with objects**
Human tidiness is the key - not only will things need to be kept in the same place, but ensuring there are no surprise objects such as shoes or boxes in the middle of the floor is also important to build confidence (leaving the toilet seat down is important too!).

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Furniture should also be kept in the same place and any enabling objects, such as steps or ramps, should be left in place and not moved. As the cat gathers a history of positive experiences and knowledge about its surroundings, and settles in, it will cope with change better, but changes should always be subtle, gradual and considerate.

**Give safe access to higher places**
Blind or visually-impaired cats may be less confident in jumping and getting up high and some may not even try. However, they may naturally want to sit up higher. Create access points to allow the cat to get up and down safely, such as steps, ramps or strategic placement of furniture. Low hiding places are important too, particularly as it may take some time for the cat to become confident in using the higher points.

**Strategic furniture placement, ie, a low chair under a low window, can facilitate jumping up and down, whilst ramps or steps up to furniture can facilitate safe access and build confidence (©Linda Ryan).**

**Introducing other pets**
If there are other resident animals in the home, such as other cats or dogs, introductions need to be made slowly so that their future relationships are successful. If considering introducing a blind or visually-impaired cat to a dog or other cat, it is much more likely to be successful with an animal that is quiet with a gently demeanour rather than one with a loud or boisterous character. This can be done through gradual exposure to each other as outlined below.

- Scent-swapping will help the animals get to know each other in a non-contact way. Some bedding from each animal can be swapped into the other animal’s environment (©Linda Ryan).
- Barrier off an area outside the cat’s door to their space so that the resident animal cannot barge into their room.
- Open the door a crack and widen gradually using a wedge.
- Widen enough for the cat to be able to come out without the resident animal being able to enter the cat’s room.
- Let the two animals hear/smell each other through a gap or gate – because the new cat can’t see, a visual introduction is not possible, so things need to be taken slowly so it doesn’t become startled, overwhelmed or anxious.
- Allow both animals to explore each other’s space while the other is not present.
- Some proactive, positive reinforcement training of each in each other’s presence, should be calm and will help to build good associations around each other.
- Careful supervised interactions can progress as they learn more about being safe and calm around each other.

It doesn’t matter how slow this process is – some may choose to have one animal upstairs and another downstairs so neither is too restricted and each can have lots of enrichment, fun and social interaction with their owner(s) until they can safely mingle together under supervision.

**Finding out about social interactions**
It is important to get to know the cat’s individual preferences – for example, does it like to be touched (where, how long, how etc), does it prefer human-interactive play or just like to be near people but not physically interactive. It may want to be left in peace, at least at the beginning. Slow careful approaches with a gentle verbal warning of approach will help the cat orient to you and your approach. Touch should always be gentle and continuous for brief periods – ie, not taking your hands off and putting them back on, potentially startling the cat each time. It is always a good idea to encourage the cat to come to you rather than encroach on its space. Take time to build positive
associations during social interactions between the cat and people and other animals in the home, watching the animals’ body language and behaviours to ensure we are sensitive to their choices.

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**Training helps**
Proactive positive reinforcement training can play an important role in helping blind and visually-impaired cats learn about their environments, build confidence in their own skills and help them learn to navigate. Teaching a cat to touch and follow a target and using this to help the cat learn about many things including doorways, ramps and stairs can greatly aid the settling in process. Additionally, it can help to build a trusting bond with the cat, teaching it to play and learn practical skills such as coming when called, moving with confidence with you and wearing a harness.

**Play and stimulating predatory behaviours**
Once settled into the environment, rotating toy types, textures and scents can provide novelty and enrichment. This would be important for any cat, but especially for indoor-only cats, by providing lots of different options to help fulfil as many of the cat’s non-visual senses and natural cat abilities as possible. Examples of play options include:

- **Puzzle feeders.** Finding food through play and exploration rather than in a bowl is a great option for cats and a visually-impaired or blind cat should be no different in its ability to ‘challenge-feed’. Initially, a bowl can be used for feeding until the cat is ready for more of a challenge.
- **Scented toys, such as with catnip, valerian or silver vine.** Keep separate sealable bags for each in which to store toys when not in use to keep them fresh and interesting.
- **Large ‘kicking’ toys with a fluffy outside and a crackly centre, for texture and interest.**
- **Small toy mice, scrunched-up paper and lightweight balls with bells inside – even if the cat can’t see them, it can enjoy the tactile and auditory experience.**
- **Novel textures such as feathers, raffia, crackle-stuffing and things which make interesting sounds such as squeaks, jingles, rattles etc, for auditory interest.**

**Outdoor access?**
This takes considerable thought and risk analysis. The cat has to be totally physically and emotionally safe outdoors. Going out could be enriching but it could also be overwhelming or frustrating. Two possible ways a blind or visually-impaired cat could experience the outdoors safely are:

- **Harness train the cat slowly and carefully using positive reinforcement training so you and the cat can go outside, gradually building the cat’s confidence – not all cats accept harnesses, and even if they do, outdoor access should only be in quiet, safe places where there is no risk of meeting unknown animals, eg, around your garden.**
- **Utilise a safe, confined outdoor area that the cat can explore independently, eg, an outdoor pen or cat-proof fenced garden.**

For those cats that cannot have access to the outdoors, some of the outdoors can be brought in by locking windows with a 1 cm gap to allow sounds and smells to come in from outside. Additionally, cat-friendly plants such as cat grass, spider plants, African violets, Christmas cactus, bamboo and herbs such as peppermint, rosemary, thyme, lavender can be brought into the home for sensory stimulation.