

Relocating a cat

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Alida travels regularly with her Chinchillas for TV work locally and overseas. This article shares lessons learned on cat behaviour during relocation. The key principle is that a cat needs a “place of safety” during a journey and upon arrival in a new place.

The “place of safety” rule

The golden rule in re-homing or traveling with a cat (kitten or adult) is the “PLACE OF SAFETY” rule. It works like this:

- The cat was safe in his known (old) environment – this is his reference “place of safety”.
- During travel, the container becomes the temporary place of safety. Imagine yourself in this position: your known safe environment gone, replaced and reduced to the walls of the container that carries you!
- It is important that the cat must feel safe in the travel container. During transit, it may help to darken the container by throwing a blanket over it, especially over the mesh.
- Upon arrival in the new home or location, the travel container is now the cat's only known place of safety in a world full of unfamiliar sounds and smells, and strangers around him.
- Make sure the arrival location is suitable (see next paragraph) before letting the cat out of the travel container.
- Allow the cat to get out of the travel container (the place of safety) in its own time.
- Assure that the cat can ALWAYS retreat back to the place of safety unobstructed.



Alida and cats at Malpenza Airport, Milan, 2003.
A travel box becomes the place of safety during a journey.
It should be used as place of safety till the cat is used to its new environment.

Arrival location preparation

- Prepare an arrival room with no other pets and for which you can close the door.
- There must be a litter tray. For a kitten: make sure it is low enough for the kitten to get into.
- Set up water (glass bowl) and food (e.g. dry pellets).
- If a cat igloo or similar enclosed container is used, have it ready on the spot where you want the cat to sleep.
- Recommended: a scratching post.

From travel container to room

- Carry the cat in the travel box into the prepared room. The small place of safety (box) is now in a larger place of safety (room).
- Close the door (secure larger place of safety).
- Open the door of the box in such a way that the cat will be able to get in or out unobstructed.
- If you are going to use a cat igloo or other cat bed, you can put the cat into it. Don't worry if the cat does not immediately accept it.
- The cat will settle somewhere in the larger place of safety in a place where it feels safe enough, based on HIS/HER assessment of what is safe for survival.

Inside the new room

- Allow the cat to explore the larger place of safety IN IT'S OWN TIME.
- Because there are no other animals in the room, the cat will soon relax and start exploring the new room.
- Any strange noise or sudden movement that frightens the cat, will cause it to retreat to its place of safety (the travel box or igloo). This is normal.
- Gradually, the cat will relax more and the whole room will become the new place of safety.

Orientation: litter and food

- Once the cat is out of the travel box or igloo and seems relaxed, it needs orientation on where the litter box and food are.
- Place the cat inside the litter box.
- Also show it where the water and food are.
- It will probably not use the litter box or eat immediately, but will remember where the basics are for future use.
- Repeat above later until you observe that the cat used it.

Beyond the first room

- Once settled and at ease in the relocation room, leave it to the cat to explore the rest of the house in its own time.
- It will soon start to grow a wider circle of confidence with its place of safety growing wider and wider.
- If the cat is the only pet, you can open the door when the cat indicates that it wants to go out of the room, but always leave the door open in case the cat wants to retreat to its place of safety.
- **In a multi-pet house:**
 - It is advisable to keep the new cat separate for about two weeks¹.
 - The first couple of meetings with other pets should be supervised.
 - Make sure the cat can always retreat to its place of safety if needed.
 - In some cases, the cat may hiss at other animals (and be hissed at) for about a week, sometimes several months. This stage should however pass over time as the animals get used to each other.

¹ A two week "quarantine" period is recommended, because, should the cat have picked up any latent, common, contagious disease during the travel, most symptoms will show up during this period.