

Animal Progress

Dr Sally Nixon BVSc MANZCVS (Veterinary Behaviour)

PO Box 232
Myrtleford VIC 3737

0423 237 057

sallynixon@animalprogress.com

animalprogress.com

Healthy behavioural development for kittens

Congratulations on getting your new kitten! This is a handout developed to offer reliable advice to kitten owners with regard to kitten behaviour and environmental needs.

Every animal performs behaviours as a way of interacting with the environment and others. Some animals develop behaviour problems as adults and in some cases these problems could have been prevented. It is important that owners have access to reliable, scientifically correct advice when they are first getting their kitten, so as to reduce the risk of problems when their kitten grows into an adult cat (or even earlier in some cases).

Behavioural medicine is a field of veterinary science devoted to helping animals who are suffering from disorders related to a negative emotional state. Often these emotional issues cause ongoing, long-term changes in the brain that get worse over time. Due to genetic predisposition and other factors out of an owner's control, behaviour problems can still develop. Owners should not feel it is their fault that a behaviour problem has developed, but rather realise there are treatment options available. Correct early intervention to treat behaviour problems leads to a better prognosis.

Positive early experiences

How an owner interacts with a kitten can affect how a kitten will behave later in life.

It is now known that many behavioural disorders, such as urine spraying and fighting, are related to underlying emotional problems, often anxiety. Early weaning or removal from littermates in the early stages of life is very traumatic and some kittens who are orphaned may be at increased risk of developing problems.

When exposing your kitten to new things, help your kitten early by providing positive associations with the experience. Such experiences as cats coming into the backyard, thunderstorms, people visiting, or dogs barking can be opportunities for you to give your kitten lots and lots of treats and to play a game. If your kitten will not take the treats or is not interested in the game, he/she may be too nervous, and you are best to try to remove the kitten from the situation as much as possible to a place where the kitten will take treats.

Early, gentle handling of kittens in a positive way by as many people as possible each day can benefit a kitten's willingness to be affectionate with people. This has been shown to be of benefit if done for kittens younger than 12 weeks of age. After that age, the extra handling may have no effect. To make the experience positive, the new people handling the kitten should have the kitten in a comfortable position gently stroking along the back and offering small treats for allowing the handling. If the kitten is trying to get away, it is best to let the kitten go and ask people to offer treats when the kitten comes to them.

Providing a home where your kitten can curiously explore at his/her own pace and find no threats is good, but offering the opportunity for a kitten to find that exploring and investigating leads to good outcomes, such as getting treats, is even better.

A kitten needs an enriching environment that offers the correct level of nutrition, comfort, social outlets, play and investigation leading to positive learning. Availability of fresh water, food, bedding, shelter, warmth, physical stimulation, mental stimulation, social stimulation and toys offers a kitten an environment that is comfortable and also stimulating.

Cats like the opportunity to be up high. By increasing accessibility to elevated places, such as book shelves, cats can feel like they have a vast amount more space inside and they will be happy with the ability to rest up high, able to look down on the world.

Cats also like hiding places and being in little caves. Such opportunities are great to offer your kitten.

Toys and play

Rough play with a kitten is more likely to lead to aggression in an adult cat.

Kittens who react with biting can be very cute and often such behaviour can be unintentionally reinforced by owners. When the kitten is older and is chasing an owner's legs to grasp and bite, it can be a big problem.

Play should be gentle and any play should be directed at objects, rather than people. Never engage in rough play with your kitten.

Any toys should be rotated. If you have lots of toys for your kitten, instead of leaving them all out, a kitten will find each toy more stimulating if they seem to have a "new" toy available every 2 days. Put most of the toys away and have just 2-3 toys available, changing them every 2 days. When kittens and cats play, they often like to play in the same way that they hunt: stalk, burst of energy with chase, then catch. Let your kitten occasionally catch any toy to feel rewarded and successful, rather than frustrated. Laser toys do not offer the satiation of physically catching "prey" and there is a possibility they may be detrimental to the mental health of cats due to continuous frustration.

Activity feeding

Cats have evolved to spend more time hunting than feeding and to have very small meals often. Cats prefer to work for their food.

Instead of feeding your cat in a bowl, you can offer your cat food in a feeding toy or puzzle. The toy should not be too difficult such that the cat gets frustrated and does not eat enough, but it should be at a level that is mildly challenging and stimulating.

Many commercial feeders have a variable setting so that you can start on an easy level and slowly increase the challenge. There are many home-made versions of activity feeders that can be created as well.

Introduction to existing cats

If you have an older cat already, any introduction should be gradual and all experiences for both cat and kitten should bring about good outcomes. The kitten and cat should never be forced to associate with each other. Instead, they should have short sessions of coming together and each should get a treat they like when they meet the other. The meetings should be at a distance first, then increase the proximity of every meeting, dependent on whether they looking interested and relaxed with each other. You can even have the first few sessions of just being introduced to each others' smells by introducing the bedding of one cat to the other and giving treats.

Having separate core areas for each cat is beneficial, so that they can have their own space. Ideally, each cat should have his/her own space in a room with the availability of a litter tray, feeding station and water bowl/fountain. Bedding, scratching pole and the ability to rest in an elevated position should also be provided. Choose a place or room for the existing cat that he/she already prefers. Offer the kitten a core area somewhere else in the house.

Feliway™ is a synthetic version of a pheromone (hormone secreted into the air) that has the effect of making a kitten or cat feel more secure. In the natural setting, this hormone is secreted by the cheek glands of cats and it is used to mark places where they feel familiar and relaxed. Feliway™ comes in the form of a diffuser that can be plugged in at home and lasts a month. It also comes in the form of a spray. Studies have shown that Feliway™ helps many kittens cope better with the transition to a new home. It can also help any existing cat with the stress and adjustment of having a new feline in the house.

Cats can be trained!

Training can be fun for you both and can start as soon as you have your kitten. If you are having a focused training session where your kitten is learning a new trick, it is good to keep the sessions short so that the kitten does not get distracted and so that you can end on a good note.

All training should be done using positive reinforcement. Positive reinforcement is when the kitten gets something it finds rewarding and pleasant for doing a behaviour, which means it will do the behaviour more often in the future. The reward should come to the kitten immediately after he/she has performed the behaviour and before having the chance to perform another behaviour.

Positive reinforcement training is a great way to increase mental and social enrichment for your cat and it can increase the bond between you and your cat.

Clicker training can be particularly useful for cats.