



## Healthy behavioural development for kittens

Congratulations on getting your new kitten! This is a handout offering advice to kitten owners about kitten behaviour and environmental needs.

Every animal interacts with the environment and other individuals in different ways. How we care for them and respond to them can have profound effects that influence future emotional responses and behaviour. Depending on an animal's health and early life experiences, some animals develop behavioural problems as adults. In some cases, these problems could have been prevented if the cat's caregiver had access to reliable, scientifically correct advice when they first adopted their kitten.

Due to genetic predisposition, the effects in the first few weeks before adoption, as well as other factors out of an owner's control, behavioural problems can still develop. However, the risk of a behavioural problem developing can be reduced when an owner understands their kitten's behavioural, environmental and social needs, and can also understand and respond appropriately when the kitten is fearful or stressed. If a behavioural problem develops, early intervention should be sought by seeking help from the animal's veterinarian.

### 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, such as anxiety, frustration and not having their needs met. 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, they 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.

Understanding your kitten's body language can significantly help you provide positive experiences for them and be there for them when they are stressed. This website can be very helpful for learning more about the effects of fear, anxiety and stress, and how to mitigate it:

<https://www.fearfreehappyhomes.com/>

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 is most beneficial if done for kittens younger than 12 weeks of age, and preferably earlier than 8 weeks, so it should be something breeders are doing. After 12 weeks, 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. The availability of fresh water, food, bedding, shelter, warmth, physical stimulation, mental stimulation, social stimulation, hiding places, elevated platforms 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 bookshelves, 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, 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 homemade versions of activity feeders that can be created as well.

## Introducing your kitten to your other 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. Introducing each cat to the smell of the other can be a good first step so that they make positive associations with the smell of each other. This can be done by introducing the bedding of one cat to the other and then giving treats. When you are ready for them to meet, arrange short introductions in a neutral area with each cat at a distance from the other, receiving things they enjoy, such as treats. Gradually increase the proximity of every meeting, depending on whether they look interested and relaxed around each other.

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/or food-delivery toys and water bowl/fountain. Bedding, scratching areas, hiding places and the ability to rest in an elevated position should also be provided. Choose a place or room for the existing cat that they already prefer. Offer the kitten a core area somewhere else in the house.

Feliway™ is a synthetic version of a pheromone that can help a kitten or cat feel more secure. Feliway™ comes in the form of a diffuser that can be plugged in at home and lasts a month, which can help your new kitten settle in.

## 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. 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.