



Socializing Your Kitten

What Age Is Best for Kitten Socialization?

A kitten is most receptive to socialization between two and seven weeks of age. If they're handled by people, enjoys lots of pleasant interaction with other pets and has many new experiences during this period, they're more likely to remain friendly toward humans and other animals as they mature—and they'll be less stressed by new experiences as well. If, on the other hand, a kitten has no social contact with people by seven to nine weeks of age, they may fear humans for the rest of their life. Attempting to tame a wild-born, unsocialized adult cat can be as difficult as working with any other wild animal. While many former feral cats can, over months or years, become more tolerant of a familiar person, most will never be very sociable.

Although early handling and environmental enrichment is undeniably beneficial to kittens, *this doesn't mean that they should be separated from their mother at an early age.* Mom passes on valuable social skills to her kittens, and some evidence suggests that kittens weaned before four weeks of age may have trouble relating to other cats when they grow up. If a mother cat is in a good home and her kittens get plenty of human handling and interaction, many cat experts recommend keeping kittens with their mother and litter for up to twelve weeks of age. However, if you're considering adopting a kitten from a litter that hasn't been handled by people at all, plan to bring your new kitten home by six to seven weeks of age at the latest. Spending time with their litter and mom is good for a kitten—but receiving proper socialization to people is crucial for their development into a happy, sociable companion.

How to Socialize Your Kitten

Early Handling and Enrichment

If you have a mother cat and her litter in your household, you're responsible for socializing the kittens. Get started as soon as possible! Substantial evidence indicates that handling and environmental enrichment starting shortly after birth is valuable for many young animals, including cats. Careful rearing early-on in life will help kittens mature into wonderful, well-adjusted pets.

Studies show that the more human contact a kitten gets before seven weeks of age, the friendlier that kitten is likely to be toward humans when he grows up. Early handling not only vastly improves the odds that the kittens will like people, but it also speeds up their physical development. Kittens who are held and stroked for just a few minutes each day will open their

eyes earlier, begin exploring earlier and be less afraid of strangers and other unusual things that they encounter later in life.

- If the mother cat doesn't mind your presence, you can start handling even newborn kittens briefly every day. Pick them up one at a time, stroke them gently, turn them over for a couple of seconds, and then put them back with their littermates.
- Use caution—a little bit of stimulation goes a long way at this age. Handling kittens too much may backfire, especially if they're very young or if their mother seems anxious about your interaction with them. So stick to very short handling sessions.
- Some mother cats can be very protective of their newborn kittens, especially for the first few days after birth. If this is the case, try to handle the kittens for a few moments while mom is out of the room, perhaps during her mealtime. If you find that mom's too nervous to allow any contact with her newborn kittens, don't fret—it's most important to start handling them after they're about two weeks of age.

Once a kitten's eyes and ears are fully functional and they're capable of regulating their own body temperature (between three and four weeks of age), they can really start absorbing new experiences. In addition to continued handling, they need exposure to a variety of novel sights, sounds, smells and sensations.

- Continue to handle the kittens daily so that they become very comfortable with being picked up, held and touched all over.
- At four weeks of age, the kittens can eat solid food, and if their mom is a mouser, you may see her start bringing them prey. This is when most kittens start getting interested in chasing and pouncing on moving objects. (Kittens who are weaned early tend to start playing with toys a little earlier.) At this stage, you can provide valuable enrichment by introducing the kittens to interactive toys. (See the section below for more information about choosing and using toys.)
- Expose the kittens to different walking surfaces, including carpet, grass, linoleum, gravel and concrete.
- Provide objects for them to explore, such as cardboard boxes, paper shopping bags, packing paper and toys that encourage them to investigate various holes with their tiny paws. Rotate playtime objects frequently so that they don't become bored.
- Make scratching posts available.
- If you have a fenced-in yard, allow the kittens to have short, supervised periods of time outdoors. If you don't have a securely fenced yard, you can use an exercise pen for dogs or another type of enclosure to keep the kittens safe. (Don't leave them alone outside. Young kittens make easy meals for hungry predators!)
- Again, use caution. Although exposure to handling and new experiences is important, you don't want to overwhelm the kittens. Gently petting them for just a minute or two a couple of times a day is enough to develop their social skills. Likewise, even small amounts of auditory, tactile and visual input can increase coordination, problem-solving skills and sociability later on in life.

Fingers Are Not Toys!

Three to four weeks of age is a great time to introduce interactive toys for your kitten to chase. Use toys attached to a string or a wand so that you can make them bounce and skitter around like mice or birds. Not only will tempting interactive toys entertain and exercise your kitten—they'll also teach him a valuable lesson. It's extremely important for young cats to learn early-on that human fingers and toes are NOT toys. Play biting becomes much more painful as cats get older. If your kitten scratches or bites your hands or ankles in play, make sure you have a toy handy so that you can distract them with it. Redirecting their attention to a toy gives them an appropriate outlet for their natural play behavior.

Kitten Kindergarten

For most cats, the only trips outside their house involve a cramped cat carrier and a scary vet clinic. It's understandable that many cats find vet visits traumatic and remain fearful of travel and new experiences throughout their lives.

Most pet parents now know that it's important to take their puppies to classes so that they can learn how to interact with humans and other dogs. But until very recently, kittens were not offered the same advantages. In recent years, cat behavior experts have realized that kitten classes are a great way to establish good behavior. A program called Kitten Kindy™ was started by Dr. Kersti Seksel in Australia, and the kitten class phenomenon is spreading rapidly

Typical kitten socialization classes include two or three sessions, often held at a veterinarian's office. Kittens are usually 7 to 14 weeks old and must be vaccinated, de-wormed, FeLV/FIV-tested and healthy to enroll. During classes, pet parents get to learn about cat behavior and health as their kittens meet new people, learn to play with other cats, encounter novel objects and enjoy interesting toys. By traveling to fun classes, kittens also learn that car rides don't just mean traumatic trips to the vet. This helps keep them calm when they need to be transported to various places later in life. Many kitten classes also show pet parents how to teach their kittens a few basic skills, such as sit, fetch and come when called. Cats are very smart and typically respond well to reward-based training.

What If My Cat Wasn't Properly Socialized?

If you have an older kitten or cat who missed out on early socialization, don't worry. The younger they are when you start working with them, the friendlier they're likely to become, but even older cats can benefit from remedial socialization. All behavior can be modified, and while it's much easier to teach a very young cat to accept humans, it's not impossible to make an older cat more comfortable with their surroundings. Just remember that it may take a lot longer—months or even years—for an adult cat to come around. Also realize that while your shy cat may eventually become comfortable with a small number of people, an extremely fearful adult cat is never going to be a social butterfly.

Please see the ASPCA's articles (www.aspca.org/print/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/cat-behavior) on [Fear of Visitors](#) and [Fear of Places and Objects](#) for more information about helping your cat become more comfortable around new people or things. If you're working with a truly feral cat, please see their article on [Stray and Feral Cats](#) to learn where to start.

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