

## Introducing New Kittens to Household Pets

### **I have just taken on a second cat and I want to maximize the chance of successful integration. What should I do?**

Cats are territorial animals and when you are introducing a second feline you need to remember that they need to establish their own space within the home. It might be best therefore to provide the new cat with a separate housing area and slowly integrate the cats during times when they are likely to be occupied, distracted or enjoying themselves (such as feeding, play or treat times). Until they develop some degree of familiarity, introductions are unlikely to be successful. When the cats are brought together, key resources such as food, litter boxes, shelter and social interaction need to be available in sufficient amounts to ensure that there is no unnecessary conflict. It is sensible to space these resources around the home to minimize the need to share them directly.

Increasing the amount of available space within the home can be achieved by making use of three dimensional features of the house by adding furniture, shelving and aerobic centers which allow the cats to make use of vertical as well as horizontal space. If problems arise, an extended period of separation followed by a very gradual re-introduction, perhaps accompanied by the use of pheromones and/or drugs, might need to be considered.

Although some kittens may show fear and defensive postures toward other pets in the home, most young kittens are playful and inquisitive around other animals. Therefore, it is often the existing pets that can pose more of a problem. If you know or suspect that your adult dog or cat might be aggressive toward the kitten, then you should seek professional behavior advice before introducing the pets to each other.

The kitten should be given a safe and secure area that provides for all of its needs (as above), and introductions with the existing family pets should be carefully supervised. At the first introduction there may be no immediate problems, and reinforcement of desirable responses may be all that is required.

If there is some mild anxiety on the part of your dog then introductions should be controlled, gradual, supervised and always positive. Your new kitten could be placed in a carrier or on a leash and harness so that it will not provoke your dog. Then, using a leash for control, favored rewards and training commands, encourage your dog to sit or stay calmly in the presence of the cat. Dogs that are not well trained to settle on command may need their training reviewed and improved before introduction. Alternatively a leash and head halter could be used for more immediate control and safety. Calm investigation should then be encouraged and reinforced. Any initial anxiety on the part of the dog or kitten should soon decrease and, if the dog is prevented from rough play and chasing, the kitten should quickly learn its limits with the dog, including how to avoid confrontation by climbing or hiding. Initially it would be best to keep a dog and a kitten separated unless supervised. If, after some cautious initial introductions, there were still the possibility of aggression or injury, then a behavior consultation would be advisable

Most adult cats are fairly tolerant of kittens, so that keeping the kitten in its own area, and then allowing introductions when the cats are eating or playing, should help to decrease any initial anxiety. A leash and harness or a crate can be used to control one or both of the cats during initial introductions. A

synthetic cheek gland scent (Feliway®), either as a spray or diffuser, may also be useful for easing introductions. Most cats and kittens will soon work out their relationship on their own, without injury.

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## Socializing Your Kitten

### **What is socialization?**

Socialization is the process during which the kitten develops relationships with other living beings in its environment.

### **What is habituation?**

As cats develop, there are numerous stimuli (sounds, smells, sights and events) that, when they are unfamiliar, can lead to fear and anxiety. Habituation is the process of getting used to and not reacting to those stimuli by continuous exposure under circumstances that have no untoward consequences.

### **What is localization?**

Localization is the process during which the kitten develops attachment to particular places.

### **Why are these terms important?**

Cats that receive insufficient exposure and contact with people, other animals and new environments during their first two months may develop irreversible fears, leading to timidity or aggression. Expose your kitten to as many stimuli (people, places and things), when they can most effectively socialize, localize, and habituate to these stimuli. The first 1 to 3 months of life are the most critical periods in the social development of the cat.

### **Are cats a social species?**

While they are fairly independent and can do well on their own, cats are quite social. Although feline social behavior has not been as extensively studied as for the dog, the domestic cat is much more social than has been traditionally reported. There are many situations where cats live together in groups and interact in a friendly manner. The composition of these groups differs from dog groupings. Usually they consist of mothers, daughters, aunts and grandmothers; female cats that are related. In large colonies, there may be many smaller related groups sharing the same space. Male cats will leave the group, but return for breeding. Males that have been neutered join the group in much the same way as females. Colonies of feral (wild) cats will be found in areas where food is abundant and shared, such as barns, dumpsites or around fishing ports. The cats in the group will allogroom (lick each other) and allomark (rub against each other). They will share the raising of kittens, fostering others from different litters.

### **Do cats have "personalities"?**

Research has shown that it may be possible to classify cat "personalities" similar to what has been done for dogs. One such study identified cats that were shy, timid or fearful and those that were confident. The timid cats took significantly longer to approach persons and be held by them. Another study identified cats that were "shy" and those that were "trusting". That research noted that trusting cats were trusting regardless of where they encountered people, while shy cats were more fearful the further from home they were encountered. Based on these and other studies there are two common personality types: (a) sociable, confident and easygoing; (b) timid, shy and unfriendly. Some other research has also indicated an active aggressive type as well.

### **What influences the development of personality type?**

Studies have confirmed that, not only is personality inherited from the mother, but also that friendliness is, in part, inherited from the father.

### **How does the mother cat (or queen) teach her kittens?**

Cats are very good at observational learning. This occurs when an animal watches a behavior being performed by another. The queen starts to teach her kittens at a young age. From the queen, kittens learn elimination behaviors and predatory behavior. Kittens will begin to spend time in the litter box at about 30 days of age and will learn appropriate litter usage through observation of the queen and certain olfactory (smell) cues. If allowed access to prey, the queen will begin to bring them to her offspring at about 32 - 36 days of age and teach them to hunt. The kittens will begin to be weaned and eat solid food at the same age. The choice of food is influenced by the queen. Play between kittens is an important part of social development, particularly for those kittens that will be housed with other cats later in life.

### **What can I do to improve my chances of having a social non-fearful cat?**

**Selection:** The genetics of an individual cat plays a critical role in how sociable, playful, fearful, excitable, or domineering a kitten will become. The first issue in helping to ensure that a kitten will be friendly and social when it grows up is to choose an appropriate kitten for your family. Since cats have a variety of personality types, the question is whether these personality types can be determined at the time of selection. As kitten socialization begins to decline at about 7 weeks of age, selection testing may become increasingly more accurate after this age. Therefore assessing older kittens and adult cats may provide more accurate information. The behavior of the parents, especially the father, as well as the behavior of any offspring from previous litters may be of even greater value at predicting adult behavior.

Assessment of young kittens is likely of limited value if the kittens are still progressing through the primary socialization period, and the assessment of the parents may provide just as much information.

**Early handling:** Kittens that are stimulated and handled from birth are more confident, more social, more exploratory, faster to mature and are better able to handle stress as they develop. Early handling of kittens decreases their approach time to strangers and increases the amount of time that they stayed with them. The more handling the better; but even 15 minutes a day will help to improve later behavior. Regular and frequent handling from birth increases the likelihood that the kitten will relate well to people when placed into a home after weaning at 6 to 9 weeks of age. Therefore, kittens obtained from

a breeder or home where they have had frequent contact and interaction with the owners are likely to be more social and less fearful as they develop.

To summarize, the two most important factors in how social a cat becomes with people are its genetic personality, and the amount of socialization it receives during the sensitive period of socialization which is thought to be 3 - 7 weeks of age. Certainly, the greater exposure a kitten has to humans of all ages, other pets and novel situations, the better adjusted that kitten will be. Therefore the best options may be to obtain a kitten from a home where good socialization has already taken place, or to obtain a new kitten prior to 7 weeks of age and ensure immediate socialization.

### **How can I assist my new kitten's socialization?**

Introduce your kitten to many new people and situations as possible. If the kitten is meeting a person or other pet for the first time and remains playful and inquisitive be certain to encourage and reinforce the kitten for its actions, and repeat the exposure regularly with a variety of similar stimuli. If however the kitten is fearful or withdrawn, a more gradual introduction while pairing favored treats and play with each exposure may improve the relationship fairly quickly. Be certain that the stimulus moves slowly so as not to startle the kitten. Strangers may be able to offer treats or stimulate play using a favored chase toy. However, when introducing a kitten to other animals, the other animal should be well restrained and calm so that the kitten's fear is not enhanced, and it can be motivated to take the treats and food for the owner. There may be a great deal of individual variation, with some cats quickly adapting to new people and other pets, and others requiring a very gradual program of desensitization and counterconditioning.

In order for the kitten to develop and maintain good social skills with other cats it would be advisable to introduce the kitten into a home with other cats, or to consider obtaining more than one kitten. A lack of ongoing and regular social interactions with other cats may make it difficult to introduce your cat to other cats later in life. In addition, cats that lack other cats as playmates may target the owners as substitute playmates for swatting, chasing, pouncing, and biting.

### **How best should I introduce my new kitten to my home?**

Your interaction with your new kitten begins on the ride home. Cats should always be transported in some kind of carrier in the car. By teaching your kitten to ride in a confined location you are providing safety for your cat in future car rides. Upon arriving at home, place the kitten in a small, quiet area with food and a litter box. If the kitten is very tiny, a small litter box with lowered sides may be necessary at first. If possible, duplicate the type of litter material used in the previous home. Before putting your new kitten into any new location, it is important to inspect it for nooks and crannies where a kitten might hide or get stuck. Often in a new environment, a kitten may look for a secluded place to hide. However, all kittens and cats will eventually need to investigate their new surroundings. For a new kitten this is a more manageable task if you limit space available and initially supervise the kitten. When cats do investigate they use a random method of search. After your new kitten has had some quiet time in a restricted location, slowly allow access to other areas of the home.

Kittens are natural explorers and will use their claws to climb up onto anything possible. In the first few weeks, slow and limited access to the home will allow exploration as well as giving you the ability to

monitor the kitten's behavior. Monitor for any stimuli, rooms or areas that seem to frighten the cat, and use favored treats and play to encourage further exposure.

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