



Wausau Animal Hospital

Socializing Your Kitten

What Is Socialization?

The socialization period occurs during the early weeks of a cat's life. During this period, he learns how to interact appropriately with other cats, people and other animals. Through numerous experiences with the world around him, he also gets used to all of the sights, sounds and smells he'll encounter as an adult. Kittens, like most young animals, can do this very easily—until they reach a certain age. When they reach the end of the socialization period, they're naturally wired to become much more suspicious of things they haven't yet experienced. This age-specific natural development serves an important purpose. The open, fearless nature of a young kitten during the socialization period allows him to become comfortable with all of the everyday things that will be part of his adult life. The suspiciousness that begins after the socialization period ensures that he'll react with a healthy dose of caution to new things in his environment that could be dangerous, like potential predators.

If you have a young kitten, it's your job to take advantage of the sensitive socialization period by helping him learn to be comfortable as a companion animal living in a human world—a world that includes many different types of people, environments, sights, noises, smells, sensations, cats and other animals.

What Age Is Best for Kitten Socialization?

A kitten is most receptive to socialization between two and seven weeks of age. If he's handled by people, enjoys lots of pleasant interaction with other pets and has many new experiences during this period, he's more likely to remain friendly toward humans and other animals as he matures—and he'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, he may fear humans for the rest of his 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.

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.

Early handling

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.

Continued handling and enrichment

Once the kittens' 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.
- In 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 to 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 him with it. Redirecting his attention to a toy gives him an appropriate outlet for his natural play behavior.

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