

Socialization Tips for Kitten Owners

Even though cats have been domesticated for thousands of years, each new kitten that comes into our world must learn about humans. Socialization is the process during which kittens develop positive relationships with other living beings. The most sensitive period for successful socialization is during the first three months of life, specifically from three to nine weeks. The experiences your kitten has during this time will have a major influence on his developing personality and how well he gets along with people and other animals as he grows into adulthood. It is very important for kittens to have frequent, positive social experiences during these early months in order to prevent asocial behavior, fear, and biting. Kittens that are inadequately socialized may develop irreversible fears, leading to timidity or aggression. This is not to say that socialization is complete by three months of age, only that it should begin before that time. Continued exposure to a variety of people and other animals, as your kitten grows and develops, is an essential part of maintaining good social skills. It is also extremely important that he be exposed to new environments and stimuli at this time (e.g., sounds, odors, locations) to reduce the fear of 'the unfamiliar' that might otherwise develop as he ages.

It is important that your kitten have multiple positive experiences with a variety of people and animals. It would be beneficial to have each family member and each visitor give your kitten a treat each time he is approached or handled. You should make certain that he has the opportunity to meet and receive treats from a wide variety of people of all ages, appearances, and both sexes during the early formative months. Every effort must be made to see that your new cat also has plenty of opportunities to learn about children. Kids can seem like a completely different species to kittens since they walk, act, and talk much differently than adults. Cats that grow up without meeting children when they are young may never feel comfortable around them when they become adults. Even if you do not have a dog, try to plan for your kitten to meet a dog that is gentle with cats in a supervised enclosed area while the dog is on a leash. If you have another cat, introduce your kitten slowly and give them both a chance to spend time apart. If you do not have another cat, it may be a good idea to let your kitten "visit" with other cats or kittens that are well socialized already. Keep in mind, however, that upper respiratory infections, feline leukemia, and other illnesses may be spread by casual contact between cats. Never expose your kitten to a cat that has not been vaccinated or that is showing signs of illness in any way.

And last, but not least, be careful to avoid physical punishment or any other interactions with people or experiences in new environments that might make your kitten anxious. Verbally or physically punishing a young pet will damage his bond with you and make it increasingly wary or anxious of being approached or handled by people. Techniques such as tapping the nose, grabbing the scruff of the neck, or hissing at a kitten may only serve to make it more fearful of people. In general, any interactions with people that might make a kitten anxious should be avoided. Obviously, your kitten's visits with us much include his vaccinations. We will do whatever we can to make the overall experience a positive one. Please feel free to bring your kitten's favorite treats with you for his regular check ups. Best wishes for a long and happy relationship!

