



Socializing Your Kitten

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.

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, and have lots of interaction with other pets at this stage, then as adults they are more likely to remain friendly in these situations. 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.

Although early handling is 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 kittens weaned before four weeks of age may have trouble relating to other cats when they grow up. 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 his litter and mom is good for a kitten, but receiving proper socialization to people is crucial for his development into a happy, sociable companion.

How to Socialize Your Kitten

By following the steps discussed below you can make considerable progress in the social development of your new kitten.

Early Handling and Enrichment

If you have a mother cat and her litter in your household, get started as soon as possible socializing the kittens! Handling and environmental enrichment starting shortly after birth is valuable for many young animals.

Kittens that 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.



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- 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, and then put them back with their littermates.
- Stick to very short handling sessions and use caution. Handling kittens too much may backfire, especially if they're very young or if their mother seems anxious about your interaction with them.
- Some mother cats can be very protective of their newborn kittens. If this is the case and 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.

- 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. At this stage, you can provide valuable enrichment by introducing the kittens to interactive 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, 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.

Again, use caution. Although exposure to handling and new experiences is important, you don't want to overwhelm the kittens. Small amounts of auditory, tactile and visual input can increase coordination, problem-solving skills and sociability later on in life.



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Fingers Are Not Toys!

Toys are a great way to help get your kitten more sociable. Using different toys will also help keep them entertained and active as they grow up. Use toys attached to a string or a wand so that you can make them bounce and skitter around like mice. Try and stay away from using your fingers and toes as toys. This will encourage that it is alright to bite these body parts and as the kitten gets older the biting becomes more painful. 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.

What If My Cat Wasn't Properly Socialized?

Don't worry if you have an older cat that may have missed out on early socializing. All behavior can be modified. It's not impossible to make an older cat more comfortable with his surroundings; it just may take a lot longer. 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.