

Socialization and Fear Prevention in Kittens

What is socialization and why is it important?

Socialization refers to a process in which kittens interact with and develop appropriate social behaviors toward other members of the same species. In practice, "socialization" is used more broadly and includes learning to how to interact with other social species and adjust to relevant environmental stimuli.



The most sensitive period for socialization in kittens occurs when kittens are between two and seven weeks of age. During this period, kittens form social attachments most easily. Their experiences, both positive and negative, have a greater long-term effect than at other times in development.

Your kitten may be at least seven weeks old when you adopt her. She can still be socialized with care. It is helpful to provide plenty of *positive* experiences with humans, other animals, and environments that she might encounter as an adult cat.

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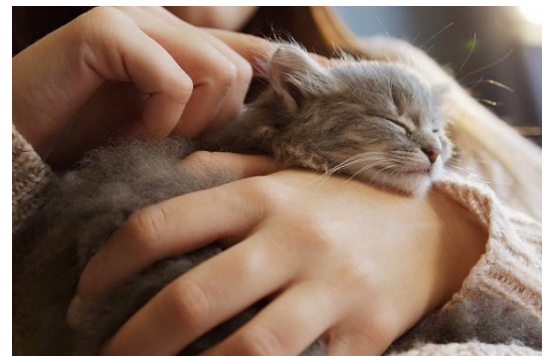
Socializing kittens can reduce the risk that they will develop fearful behavior as they mature. Well-socialized kittens become familiar with a variety of friendly people, gentle animals, and novel environments.

What is habituation?

Habituation is the process of getting accustomed to something through repeated encounters that do not trigger a strong emotional response. For example, people who live near an airport usually habituate to the sound of planes overhead. Kittens readily habituate to a wide variety of sights, sounds, smells, and events, as long as the exposures are not overly frightening.

What is systematic desensitization and counterconditioning?

Desensitization is the gradual exposure to a stimulus; counterconditioning is the pairing of a positive emotion with a stimulus that has triggered a negative emotional response. A commonly used behavior modification technique combines desensitization with counterconditioning and is used to help pets that exhibit fear.



It is important to recognize when your kitten is frightened, because a single scary exposure can cause long-lasting trauma. If your kitten shows fear about any aspect of socialization, remove her from the situation until you can arrange the stimulus so that is less scary. For instance, if your kitten hisses or tries to run away when she meets a child for the first time, bring your kitten to safety. Later, create a more controlled session, perhaps keeping the child several feet away and making sure the child sits still quietly.

During this process, give your kitten tasty treats or play with her so that she has a chance to relax and enjoy herself even though there is a child nearby. Do not hesitate to seek professional guidance if you notice your kitten is frightened.

What is the right way to socialize my kitten?

Socialization should always be tailored to the individual kitten. Watch your kitten carefully for signs of fear. If your kitten hides, tries to escape, will not play, or will not take treats, she is overwhelmed. Take her home and try again another day with a lower intensity stimulus. A frightened kitten cannot adjust or habituate.

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discontinue the socialization program until you can consult with a professional."

For some kittens, even a low-level stimulus is too scary. A kitten's level of fear is affected by many factors, including her genes, her mother's health, and her life experiences starting from (or even prior to) her birth.

If you notice that your kitten continues to show signs of fear, discontinue the socialization program until you can consult with a professional. Your kitten may be a candidate for desensitization and counterconditioning therapy in which the intensity of exposure is purposefully reduced and is paired with something very pleasant in order to give the kitten a chance to relax and habituate.

What experiences should be included in a socialization program?

When designing your kitten's socialization program, consider the experiences that you expect might be in store for your kitten when she matures. Many kittens will encounter dogs, other cats, and children, so early exposure can be helpful. Also, all kittens will need grooming and medical care at some point in their lives. Now is the time to introduce your kitten to these important situations.

- Introduce your kitten to a leash and harness so that you can bring her to all sorts of places and keep her safely close to you.
- To introduce your kitten to a stranger or child, let the kitten initiate the interaction. The person may have a fun toy, or some treats, but should not try to grab the kitten. If your kitten approaches calmly or playfully, then an adult may begin to pet and even pick your kitten up. Young children should not be permitted to hold kittens as they may hold too tightly or may even drop the kitten.
- Before introducing your kitten to another cat or to a dog, be sure the other animal is friendly and has had many calm experiences with kittens. It may be best to set up a barrier such as a tall gate and let your kitten approach when she is ready. Allow the pets to sniff each other through the gate. Take many breaks to treat and play with your kitten.
- You may want to bring your kitten to your friends' homes so that she can explore and encounter assorted scents and sounds. Offer favorite treats and toys to make the experience positive. The kitten should remain calm and interested, not overwhelmed. Also, by taking some car rides to fun places, your kitten will enjoy the car and is more likely to travel well as an adult.
- Teach your kitten to stand quietly on a table and begin to practice some of the manipulations that may be required for grooming and health care. Keep sessions short and fun - feed plenty of treats.
- Practice a physical exam: open your kitten's mouth and then give her a treat. Handle her paws and tail and then give her a treat.
- Practice opening her mouth as if you were giving oral medication but give her a soft food to lick instead.
- Try brushing and gently restraining her with a towel. It can even be helpful to practice some baths.

You may add any other stimuli that you expect will be important in your kitten's life and practice at a comfortable level.

What is the best way to introduce my new kitten to my home?

Your relationship with your new kitten begins on the ride home. Cats should always be transported in a safe pet carrier in the car. Learning to ride in a carrier is key for safety and is easiest to teach when a kitten is young.

When you arrive 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 (see handout “Housetraining for Kittens and Cats”).

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. All kittens and cats eventually need to investigate their new surroundings. For a new kitten, this task is more manageable if you limit the space available and initially supervise the kitten. Provide places to hide such as a pet carrier, under a coffee table, or even an empty cardboard box. Don’t allow the kitten to become trapped in dangerous or hard-to-reach places like under a sofa, behind heavy furniture, or in any narrow spaces.

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 use their claws to climb onto everything they can. In the first few weeks, slow and limited access to the home will allow exploration and also give 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 (see handout “Bringing Home Your New Kitten” for further information).