

# BEHAVIOUR AND TRAINING OF KITTENS



Kittens and cats can be very affectionate, playful and full of energy - they bring much pleasure to our lives. Patting a cat can even decrease blood pressure and help reduce stress in humans.

There are many things to consider when bringing a new kitten into a home. They require a lot of patience and perseverance. If you encounter a more stubborn problem such as aggression, chewing, scratching or soiling please contact us for some advice.

## SECTION I: INTRODUCING A NEW CAT TO THE HOUSE

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



Your interaction with your new kitten begins during the ride home in the car and all cats should be transported in some kind of carrier when in the car.

When you get home you should place the kitten in a small, quiet area with water and a litter tray. If possible, use the type of litter used in the previous home.

When you start to introduce your kitten to the house, begin the process very calmly and ensure that the first room you allow your new kitten to explore has been inspected for areas where it might hide or get stuck. Often in a new environment, a kitten may look for a secluded place to hide. The kitten needs to be given time to investigate its new surroundings and the process can be helped by limiting the space available and initially supervising the kitten closely but not interfering with its investigations. After your new kitten has had some quiet time in a restricted location, you can slowly allow access to other areas of the home.

Kittens are natural explorers and in the first few weeks gradual access to the home will allow exploration as well as the ability to monitor the kitten's behaviour.

**How can aggression between cats be prevented?**

When a new cat is introduced into a household with existing cats, problems can best be prevented by initially keeping the new cat in a separate room with water and litter facilities and supervising all interactions. If both cats have had adequate socialisation and are not too timid or fearful in nature, it is usually only a matter of time before the cats work things out on their own, and are able to share the territory with little or no aggressive displays. Kittens often like a playmate and two kittens together are often better than one as playing together helps them learn social and motor skills and expend their energy. They are also less likely to pounce on human feet!

Contact us on 9498 3000 to discuss any specific behaviour problem with one of our nurses or vets.

## SECTION II: HOUSE TRAINING

### Do I need to train my new kitten to use a litter tray?

Cats in the wild use a soil type surface for toileting. By providing a litter tray and appropriate litter, most cats do not need to be trained to use it. At about 4 to 5 weeks of age kittens leave the “nest” and find a loose material for toileting. The kitten may learn specific area preferences by observation of its mother. Kittens dig in the material and bury their stools and urine. They are naturally very clean animals. Initially, confine the kitten to a small area with the litter tray. Usually, the only other indoor area that might appeal to a number of cats is the soil around houseplants, so try to limit the access to indoor plants. Kittens will need to eliminate after they eat, after they wake up and after play. At those times place the kitten in its litter tray and praise him/her for going to the toilet.



### What type of litter material should I use?

There are many types of litter materials available today. These include fine "clumping" litters, crystals, granules, recycled newspaper pellets and many others. The type you choose is up to you but in general the finer the substrate the more acceptable it will be for the cat. Since the kitten will start toileting first by following the cues of the mother, continuing with the same litter as used in the first home is helpful.

### What size and type of litter tray should I buy?

A very small kitten may need a tray with shorter sides for easier access. As the kitten grows, a larger tray may be more appropriate. Some owners prefer litter trays with covers on them as they are a lot cleaner to manage as less litter will escape from the box when the cat scratches around. You need to be sure that the cat can negotiate the opening by stepping into it and that the cat is not too large to fit into the opening.

### Where should I put the litter tray?

The litter tray should be placed in a location that is easily accessed by the cat, yet out of the way. Try to avoid congested household areas. The cat should have some privacy where it toilets eg laundry or a bathroom. Try to put the litter tray in an area that is convenient for you to check on and keep clean daily. Do not put food and water bowls right next to the litter tray.

If there are dogs in the home, then the litter tray should be located where the cat can toilet without being bothered by them. Dogs will sometimes want to eat the cat's droppings!

### **How often should I clean the litter tray?**

Cats are very fastidious animals, and spend time making sure their coat, feet and face are clean. They also like a clean place to toilet. Faecal material should be removed at least on a daily basis. Ideally soiled patches should be removed as soon as they are noticed. Some cats dislike the odour of the litter and so it may be preferable to start with a scent free litter. A similar problem can arise with the cleansers used to clean litter trays, and so the tray should be rinsed thoroughly after each complete cleaning. Do not use ammonia based cleaners. Earth Choice Multipurpose cleaner is an enzymatic cleaner and is an ideal cleaning agent for urine. A spray called Urine-Off is available from us should your kitten urinate outside the litter tray. This product neutralizes the urine and is very effective. The whole tray should be cleaned and rinsed on a weekly basis.

### **How many litter trays do I need in my home?**

When there are multiple cats, multiple trays should be available in different locations, not all side-by-side in one place. Multiple trays in multiple locations allow housemates to avoid one another if necessary. Some cats prefer one tray for urine and one for stool. In general, there should be at least one litter tray per cat. The general rule is if you have more than one cat, have one litter tray per cat plus an extra one if possible.

### **What if the kitten does not use its litter tray?**

If the kitten begins to eliminate in locations other than its litter tray, review these steps:

- Is the litter tray in an area that is appealing and easily accessed by the cat?
- Is there anything in the area that may be a deterrent?
- Is the litter tray being cleaned often enough?
- Are there enough litter trays for the number of cats? A minimum of one tray per cat.

To determine the most appealing litter for your cat, offer two or more different litters in the same type of tray, side-by-side and see which one, the cat uses most frequently. If litter tray problems persist, additional guidance and a behaviour consultation might be required.

## SECTION III: SOCIALISATION OF THE NEW CAT

### What is socialisation?

Socialisation is the process by which the kitten learns about its own identity and the identity of the other species with which it will share its life. Appropriate socialisation enables the kitten to go on to develop relationships with other living beings.

Cats that receive insufficient contact with people, other animals and new environments during the first 8 weeks of life may develop irreversible fears, leading to timidity or aggression. It is vital to expose your kitten to as many stimuli (people, places and things), when it can most effectively socialise with and habituate to these stimuli.



### Are cats a social species?

Although they are fairly independent and can do well on their own, cats are a social species. Feline social behaviour has not been as extensively studied as that of the dog but it is well known that 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. Usually they consist of mothers, daughters, aunts and grandmothers (female cats that are related). Male cats will leave the group and live very much on the periphery, but return for breeding. Males that have been neutered join the group in much the same way as females. The cats in the group will allogroom (lick each other) and allomark (rub on each other). They will also share the raising of kittens, often fostering others from different litters.

### Do cats have "personalities"?

Research has shown that it may be possible to classify cat "personalities". One study identified cats that were shy, timid or fearful and those that were confident. The timid cats took significantly longer to approach people and would stay with the person for significantly less time than the confident cats. 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 when people were presented. Based on these and other studies two common personality types have been identified: (a) sociable, confident and outgoing; (b) timid, shy and unfriendly. Some other research has also suggested a third personality type: (c) active and aggressive.

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

Cats are very good at observational learning. This occurs when an animal watches a behaviour being performed by another. The queen starts to teach her kittens at a young age. From the queen, kittens learn about elimination behaviour and predatory behaviour preferences. The kittens will also begin to be weaned and eat solid food at 4 to 5 weeks of age. Play between kittens is also an important part of social development in early life, 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

Knowledge of the breed, assessment of the kitten's parents and evaluation of the kitten's environment and upbringing are important considerations when selecting a kitten. Some important questions to ask are: Has there been adequate exposure to people, both adults and children? Has the kitten been handled frequently? How does the kitten behave when picked up by prospective owners? Does it hiss, bite or scratch, or does the kitten purr and solicit affection?



Does the kitten approach people or does it stand away? What has been the historical behaviour of the queen and tom? Did they hunt and/or have access to prey? Do they have a good history of litter usage, and what type of litter material is used? What are the feeding habits and preferences of the parents? General observation of the temperament of both the kittens in the litter and the parents is helpful. Avoid kittens that are advertised on classified websites such as Gumtree and FaceBook market place or 'Buy swap sell' pages. Reputable and responsible breeders avoid advertising on these sites. Try either adopting from a shelter, of contacting a breed society for information on registered breeders in your area.

#### ☛ Early handling

Handling kittens early in life is important for their normal development. Kittens that are stimulated and handled from birth are more confident, more social, more exploratory, they mature faster and are better able to handle stress as they develop. Therefore, kittens obtained from a breeder or home where they have had frequent contact and interaction with the owners, provided that the contact has been appropriate, are likely to be more sociable and less fearful as they develop.

Kittens should be handled every day. Practice touching the paws, nails, ears and practice opening the mouth. Gently hold the kitten's mouth open and place a tasty morsel such as vegemite on the tongue. He/she will soon learn that opening the mouth is no big deal! Groom your kitten every day (long haired cats may need grooming twice a day). Use a fine tooth comb through the coat to look for fleas and flea dirt.



#### ☛ Attachment

The level of attachment that forms between people and cats is variable. The two most important factors appear to be the cat's genetic personality type and the amount of socialisation it receives during the first 8 weeks of age. Certainly, the greater exposure a kitten has to humans of all ages and to other pets, the better adjustment that kitten will have in its new home.

## SECTION IV:

### PLAY AND EXERCISE

#### How does play develop in kittens?

Young kittens play using chasing and pouncing behaviours that seem to have their origin in predation. Predatory play is an integral part of feline play behaviour and early learning. This play in a kitten is often aggressive and intense. Object play develops at 7-8 weeks when kittens develop the eye-paw co-ordination needed to deal with small moving objects. Full

development of locomotion occurs between 10-12 weeks and as a kitten becomes more co-ordinated play may become more intense. Kittens are attracted to moving objects and will chase and stalk them. Play is an important component of kitten development, and proper play and exercise should be encouraged.

### **What is the best way to play with my kitten?**

Play behaviour consists of stalking, pouncing, jumping, biting and clawing. Small objects that can easily be moved with paws and grasped in the mouth or between the feet are often preferred. However it is important to avoid objects that are so small that they could be swallowed and cause an intestinal blockage. Some kittens like to play with objects like string or wool but this can cause severe intestinal problems if eaten and should only be avoided.



Avoid playing with your hands as you interact with your kitten. The moving hand can become an appealing play object and attempts at correction could aggravate the situation. Although young kittens may not inflict damage, as they get older and continue to use your hands for play, serious injuries can result. Fishing rod type toys and long wands with prey type toys (feather toys, catnip mice) on the end can be used to encourage play without contact with the owner' s body. Young kittens will often fetch small fleece toys, or bat them across the floor. Cats also love to chase laser pointers around the room and its great fun to watch!

### **Why is my cat always getting into mischief?**

Another important part of the development of young animals is the need for exploration and investigation of new objects and new environments. These behaviours can lead to damage to the home as well as injury to the kitten. Preventing these problems is quite simple; you need to accept your cat' s needs to play and investigate and provide suitable opportunities and outlets for it to perform these behaviours safely.



## How can I prevent damage when I am not available to supervise?

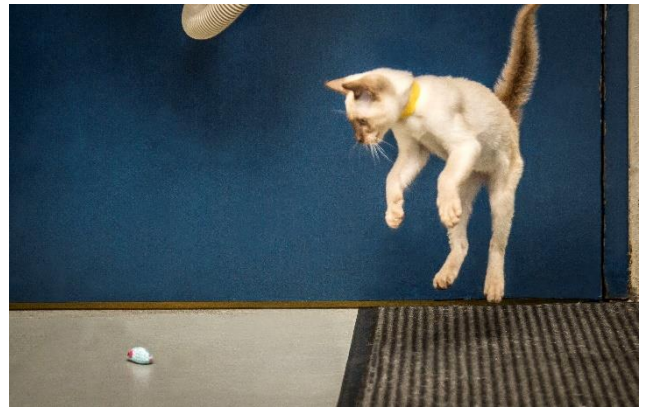
When the cat cannot be supervised leave it in a cat-proof area, with water, soft comfortable bedding and a litter tray for elimination. Although a large indoor pen may be an acceptable form of confinement for short departures, most cats can be confined in one or two rooms that have been effectively cat-proofed. This allows the cat some freedom while preventing damage and injuries. Child locks and secure containers can be used to keep your cat out of cupboards or dustbins. Any of your possessions or household objects that might be clawed, pounced on, explored, or knocked flying, should be kept out of the cat's reach. Remember that with their excellent ability to jump and climb, damage prevention measures may be needed far above floor level.

The cat should be provided with a post for scratching, some ledges for climbing and a few play toys that can be swatted, batted, or chased. Cat toys on springs or hung from doors, ping pong balls and catnip mice are often fun for cats to chase and attack. Some cats like to explore new objects, so a few empty boxes or paper bags (never plastic) will keep some cats entertained until the owner has time to play. Sometimes the best solution is to get a second cat for companionship and play, but be certain that the second cat is young, sociable and playful. Not all cats will get along, so if you are thinking of adding another cat to your home, it is best to have the new cat/kitten on a trial period in the beginning, just encase things don't work out.

Although some people think of confinement and cat-proofing as unnecessary, they are precautionary measures to keep the cat safe and prevent damage to the household when the owners are not available to supervise. Common owner complaints such as chewing on plants, scratching, climbing or playing in inappropriate locations, or eliminating outside the litter tray, are just a few of the potential problems that can best be prevented with a little planning and forethought. Then, when a family member is home and available to supervise, your cat should be given more freedom to explore and become accustomed to those areas of the home where problems might otherwise occur.

## How can over-exuberant play and play related attacks toward people be prevented?

Before any attempts at stopping or interrupting the behaviour are attempted, it is vital to provide sufficient opportunities and outlets for play. Choose play toys and activities that are appealing to the individual cat. Since play that is initiated by the cat could potentially escalate into overly aggressive play, the owner should select play toys and initiate all play sessions. Sessions initiated by the cat should be ignored or interrupted eg startling the cat with a loud noise. Interactive play with the owner should be approximately 20 minutes per day.



## It is not cruel to keep cats inside if it' s fun?

Cats have well developed hunting instincts. In the Ku-Ring-Gai area, however, many houses are built on the outskirts of national parks and there are many properties backing onto bush. Sometimes a bell or even multiple bells will help, but clever hunters will be able to keep the bells quiet while hunting. It is a good idea to keep cats inside in areas where there are lots of native fauna. All cats should be kept inside at night. Keeping cats inside will markedly reduce their chance of injury from other cats, dogs and motor vehicles too. Indoor cats also have a greatly reduced chance of getting paralysis ticks, which if unnoticed, can quickly turn deadly.

For indoor cats' health & well-being we recommend that you read the information on the Indoor Cat Initiative website [www.vet.ohio-state.edu/indoorcat.htm](http://www.vet.ohio-state.edu/indoorcat.htm) which has some very helpful information.

We wish you and your cat many happy, healthy and rewarding years together ahead. Pet ownership is a very rewarding experience.

Please do not hesitate to call us on 9498 3000 if you need advice on your cat' s health or care. We are here to help you.