



Kitten Tutor™: Socializing Kittens

Most of the time when we hear “socialization,” we think about feral kittens needing help and time to relate well to human interaction. However, if you foster neonates or orphaned kittens, socialization also means helping your kittens “learn to be cats” since they do not have a mom to fill that role. Play is also necessary to provide cats and kittens with healthy exercise and help satisfy their natural instinct to hunt. It is essential in preventing boredom which can lead to behavior problems. Fishing pole toys work well for this, and prevent using hands accidentally.

Once they are old enough, handle the kittens gently and expose them slowly, under supervision, to different sounds, smells and situations. Make sure they are used to both male and female voices (TV’s are a great help here). If you have children, other cats and/or dogs, introduce them in safe, controlled situations. It is a great plus to be able to include these acquired skills in their adoption bios. One of the advantages to adopting two kittens (besides just being more fun and twice the cuteness) is they play together and keep each other company. **Kitten socialization classes** provide structured exposure to environments, other pets, and people. Please talk to your veterinarian this.

One common mistake foster families make is “using hands as toys.” This is very easy to do since you are tickling tummies, scratching ears, etc. and the kitten will automatically latch on to play. Have toys handy and immediately let your hand go limp; pulling away only makes the kitten want to hold on. I sometimes make a hissing sound at the same time...a very negative sound to a kitten. Replace your hand with a toy and play interactively with the kitten. Bottom line is that it might be really “cute” for a 10-ounce kitten to grab your hand or nibble on your arm, but a 10-pound cat is going to be a different story, and adopters will not be happy with it either.

Positive reinforcement: It’s a scientific fact—rewarded behaviors are repeated, and behaviors that are ignored reduce in frequency. Praise (‘Good girl!’ works!), toys and treats work well to create repeated positive behaviors. Aversives like spray bottles aren’t always the best course of action: the kitten can associate the spray with you vs. the behavior, the kitten can repeat the behavior in your absence, and it doesn’t teach them what to do.

Invite people over: Have a kitten party and invite a small group of friends, including children. Be thoughtful of your kitten’s temperament. Is your kitten’s personality more like a wallflower, a party animal, or somewhere in between? Adjust activity levels and number in the party accordingly.

Introduce different environments: Animals don’t generalize well. Sounds, people, other animals, novel situations and environments are necessary. Include a ‘thumbs up,’ kitten-style, to create good associations. Treats, toys, whatever the kitten enjoys will help reinforce good behaviors.

Avoid overhandling: Handling by multiple people (just 5 minutes/day) can have long-lasting benefits, especially prior to 7 weeks. Behavior can be changed later, but it’s more challenging. (The Pet Connection: Its influence on our health and quality of life—Minneapolis U of Minnesota Press).

Please note: Pets, on average, have 3 different homes in a lifetime. It is in their best interest to raise them to be comfortable in as many situations as possible. Socialization is a crucial part of raising a healthy, well-adjusted kitten!