



# Kitten Socialization Made Easy

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**H**ow sociable and self-assured your kitten grows up to be will be determined by a combination of genetics and learning. Exposing kittens to a wide variety of people, places, and situations that they are likely to encounter over their lifetime—while they are still young—can help foster the development of a resilient and happy adult cat. These positive and diverse experiences will make your kitten more likely to enjoy social interactions and novel experiences without fear or aggression in the future. This is what kitten socialization is all about.

The ideal time to socialize your kitten is when she is between 4 and 14 weeks of age. Planning, preparation, and positive reinforcement are the keys. By providing favorite treats and toys during socializa-

tion, your kitten will associate desirable things with experiences, thus creating positive and pleasant memories.

#### PEOPLE, OTHER PETS, AND NOISES

Expose your kitten to all sorts of other people, pets, visitors, and noises.

**Planning, preparation, and positive reinforcement are the keys to successful socialization.**

This includes people not only of different ages, races, genders, and sizes but also people wearing hats or glasses and people with wheelchairs or walkers. Typical household noises can include appliances (dishwasher, blender), vacuums, radios, and TVs. Allow people to gently handle your kitten's paws, ears, mouth, and body. Be sure to provide lots of positive reinforcement in association with these different types of people and handling.

When exposing your kitten to other pets, it's best to do so gradually. Because

#### Accentuate the Positive

During socialization, focus on creating positive associations—not just on providing exposure. Here are some ways to ensure a pleasant experience:

- Massage the kitten gently while providing treats.
- Sprinkle catnip on the floor to foster exploration.
- Spray synthetic feline pheromones to enhance socialization and reduce fear.
- Have visitors offer wand toys to engage the kitten.

Visitors should avoid threatening body language such as direct approach, direct eye contact, and excessive petting. Let the kitten make the first move. “Playing hard to get” and ignoring the kitten initially may spur her curiosity.

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a cat's sense of smell is very important, you might try transferring some of the smells of other pets onto your kitten before making introductions. It can also help to introduce the animals to each other when they are separated by a baby gate or cracked door. This allows them to meet each other by scent first. Introduce kittens to calm, gentle dogs at first, preferably while the dog is leashed. Incorporate positive reinforcement training and/or special meals with these controlled introductions to create positive memories. Of course, be sure to separate the animals if either of them shows signs of fear or aggression.

### THE CARRIER, THE CAR, AND THE CLINIC

To associate a pleasant response to the presence of the carrier, leave the carrier open in the kitten's environment. Kittens should have the option to enter and exit the carrier by choice. Provide comfortable bedding in the carrier while occasionally hiding treats and toys for exploration. Feeding canned food in the carrier daily allows for a positive experience.

Once the kitten is comfortable with the carrier itself, place it inside a vehicle. (Be sure the vehicle temperature is appropriate and comfortable first.) Secure the carrier on the floor behind the passenger seat, and make sure the kitten has good footing for stability. Take a few short drives around the neighborhood, fol-

lowed by a special meal fed while the kitten is still in the carrier.

To create a positive association with the veterinary hospital, try taking her there on a day when she does *not* have an appointment. This exposes the kitten to the building and equipment and allows her to meet the staff without having any procedures performed.

### KNOW THE SIGNS OF FEAR, ANXIETY, AND STRESS

When socializing your kitten, it's important to be able to detect when the animal is feeling anxious, stressed, or frightened and needs a break. Cats will show both overt and covert signs of distress.

#### Obvious Signs

- Lowering or flattening ears
- Cowering/crouching
- Growling/hissing
- Hiding/trembling
- Tail tucking

#### Subtle Signs

- Avoiding eye contact
- Hypervigilance/being unable to settle
- Being pickier than usual about treats/refusing treats
- Blinking slowly or squinting
- Tail flicking or thrashing
- Dilated pupils
- Self-grooming
- Freezing
- Pacing
- Yawning
- Lifting the paw

## Calling All Reinforcements

Determining what reinforcers to use during kitten socialization will depend on your cat's individual preferences. Here are some ideas:

#### Treats

- Commercially available cat treats (crunchy, semi-moist, freeze dried)
- Meat-based baby food (no onions or garlic additives)
- Canned cat food/canned cheese
- Bonito flakes
- Green olives

#### Toys

- Balls
- Food storage toys
- Paper
- Plush toys
- Wand toys

#### Other Enticers

- Brushing
- Catnip
- Synthetic pheromones
- Petting



## What to Do If the Kitten Becomes Frightened

- First, physically remove the cat from the fear-inducing situation. Then find another nonstressful starting point for exposure.
- Act nonchalant! The more concerned you seem, the more concerned the cat is likely to become. Avoid coddling or reprimanding the kitten. Dramatic changes in your behavior may become predictive of fear-eliciting stimuli and may worsen the fear response. Remain relaxed and neutral, and let the reinforcers do the talking.
- Use reinforcers liberally to change the cat's emotional state.
- Allow the cat to investigate novelty at her own pace. Do not force an interaction to try to get the cat over her fear. Fear is not always rational, but it is real for the individual. Reinforce exploration with food rewards and interactive play around the objects or people.

