

INTRODUCING A KITTEN TO A NEW HOME

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

Your interaction with your new kitten begins on the ride home. Cats should always be transported in some kind of carrier in the car. By teaching your kitten to ride in a confined location you are providing safety for your cat in future car rides. Upon arriving 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 our handout on ‘House-training – using the litter box’).

The first place you put your new kitten should be inspected for nooks and crannies where a kitten might hide or get stuck. All kittens and cats will need to investigate their new surroundings. For a new kitten this is a more manageable task if you limit space available and initially supervise the kitten. When cats do investigate they use a random method of search. Be sure the room is effectively cat-proofed, which includes anywhere the cat can jump or climb. Potentially dangerous items such as electric cords and owner items that might be chewed or swallowed (such as thread, rubber bands, paper clips, children’s toys) should be booby trapped or kept out of reach (see our handout on ‘Controlling undesirable behavior in cats’). After your new kitten has had some quiet time in a restricted location, slowly allow access to other areas of the home under your supervision.

Kittens are natural explorers and will use their claws to climb up onto anything possible. In the first few weeks slow access to the home will allow exploration as well as the ability to monitor the kitten's behavior.



What should I do if I have other pets?

Although some kittens may show fear and defensive postures toward other pets in the home, most young kittens are playful and inquisitive around other animals. Therefore, it is often the existing pets that can pose more of a problem. If you know or suspect that your adult dog or cat might be aggressive toward the kitten, then you should seek behavior advice before bringing introducing the pets to each other.

The kitten should be given a safe and secure area that provides for all of its needs (see below) and introductions with the existing family pets should be carefully supervised. At the first introduction there may be no immediate problems so that reinforcement of desirable responses may be all that is required. If there is some mild anxiety on the part of your dog then introductions should be controlled, gradual, supervised and always positive. Your new kitten could be placed in a carrier or on a leash and harness so that it will not provoke your dog. Then using a leash for control, favored rewards and your training commands, encourage your dog to sit or stay calmly in the presence of the cat. Calm investigation should then be encouraged and reinforced. A leash and head halter could be used to further improve control and safety. Any initial anxiety should soon decrease and the kitten should quickly learn its limits with the dog including how to avoid confrontation by climbing or hiding. If you are not positive that you can safely leave the dog and kitten together, then a basket muzzle could be placed on your dog while you monitor the situation. If, on the other hand there is the possibility of aggression or injury then a behavior consultation would be advisable. Most adult cats are fairly tolerant of kittens, so that keeping the kitten in its own area, and then allowing introductions when the cats are eating or playing, should help to decrease any initial anxiety. A leash and harness or a crate can be used to control one or both of the cats during initial introductions. A synthetic cheek gland scent may also be useful for easing introductions. Most cats and kittens will soon work out their relationship on their own, without injury. However, if there is a threat of aggression, then details of a gradual introduction program can be found in our handout on ‘Territorial aggression’.

How can I prevent problems from developing?

The key to preventing behavior problems is to identify all of the needs of the cat and provide appropriate outlets for each. This is especially important for the indoor cat since all of its play, predation, exploration, scratching, elimination and social needs will need to be channeled into acceptable indoor options, while sexual motivation can be reduced by neutering. Interactive play with wand and movable toys can provide an opportunity to chase and play hunt, while small plastic or fleece toys that can be batted and chased or retrieved can keep the cat occupied when the owners are away. Toys can be stuffed with food or coated with catnip and paper bags, cardboard boxes and hidden food treats can provide opportunities for exploration. Highly social and playful cats may also benefit from having a second social and playful cat in the home. A comfortable blanket or rug for napping, counters, shelves or play centers for perching, posts for scratching and a proper litter area for elimination round out a number of the cats needs. One important rule of thumb is that each cat is different so you must choose the types of play and toys that are most appealing to your cat and most appropriate for your household.



Can I prevent my cat from becoming overly fearful?

Most kittens are highly social but sociability and social play begins to wane after two months of age. Therefore as soon as the kitten is obtained you should make every attempt to introduce the kitten to a wide variety of people (ages, races, infirmities) a wide variety of environments, other pets, and as many new stimuli (e.g. noises, car rides, elevator) as possible. One way to help insure a positive relationship with each new person, pet, place and event is to give the kitten one of its favored treats or toys with each new meeting and greeting.

How can I teach my cat to enjoy handling?

Depending on the personality and early experiences as a kitten, your cat may enjoy, accept, or dislike, certain types of handling from petting to bathing. In order for the cat to learn to accept and enjoy a variety of types of physical contact from humans, it is critical that the human hand only be associated with positive experiences and that all physical punishment be avoided. Begin with those types of handling that the cat enjoys or is willing to accept, and provide small treats at each of the first few sessions. Once the

cat learns to associate food with these sessions, slightly longer or intense sessions can be practiced. This type of handling can be used to help the cat become accustomed to, and perhaps enjoy, patting, grooming, teeth brushing, nail trimming, and even bathing. Never force this type of handling upon your cat as any negative experience will only make the problem worse and the cat more resistant to further handling.

It is important to remember that physical discipline is inappropriate. It can scare your cat and make him or her afraid of being picked up or held. If required, kittens should be discouraged from repeating inappropriate behaviors, by the use of punishment devices such as, remote control devices and booby traps (see our handout on 'Controlling undesirable behavior in cats').