

SOCIALISING YOUR CAT - WHY, HOW AND WHEN?

Socialising is a human term. According to the Free Dictionary, it means :

- to mix socially with others
- to behave in a way that is acceptable to their society

We want our cats to mix politely with other cats and to humans, even if they don't have to be friends. We want our cats to be handled easily when they need it, eg at the veterinary surgery, the groomers and at home. We want to carry our cats in a travel crate, and ideally walk on a harness and leash. In short, we want to have our polite and well educated cats with us when we go places, instead of just staying at home.



Sounds GREAT! How Do We Socialise Our Kittens?

The Easy Way – When They Are Kittens

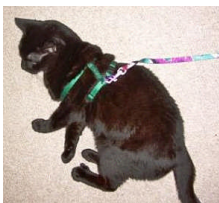
There's a fabulous stage of development in kittens called the socialising period – it lasts from about 4-6 weeks old till **only about 10 weeks old**. This is the age when the queen normally teaches the kittens what's OK in their world – and what's not. She allows them to explore new things safely, using their own curiosity.

Kittens that are born to "owned cats" and are handled by humans between 4 & 7 weeks of age tend to be more social and potentially less aggressive, so getting a cat of 'known parentage' eg from a breeder, can be useful. Otherwise, consider adopting an adult cat (see "personality" below).

Most kittens in Australia are born to unowned or semi-owned cats, and these queens don't always teach kittens the right things. So it's important **AS SOON AS YOU GET THEM HOME** to socialise your kitten. Kittens are generally curious, but are security conscious so gentle introductions to new experiences are a must.

NOW when you get your kitten home do the following:

- **Handle your kitten** all over. Start by patting their favourite areas (head, chin, base of tail), and gradually get him used to gently handling his feet, tail tummy and chest. Look in his ears, open his mouth and take a peep at the teeth and extend the claws by pressing gently on the top of the toes. Hand your kitten with gentle confidence, and keep sessions short at first.



- **Put your kitten in a harness** for 5 minutes on the first day, increasing to 30 minutes so the kitten learns that a harness is OK. Pop a leash on the harness once you get to the 4th day and gradually the kitten will learn to keep you company in public on a leash.
- **Wash your kitten** with a damp cloth on the first day, then a wetter cloth, then over time put it in the sink/bath with wipe it down with a wet cloth and gradually get your kitten used to bathing/playing with water, and get it used to being rinsed with a damp cloth. Allergies to cats generally develop from cat dander, and regularly wiping your kitten with a damp cloth can reduce dander.



- **Groom your kitten** with rubber curry glove or rubber brush, or with a slicker brush for longer haired cats. Again keep sessions short until kitten gets used to it and don't try for a full grooming session until kitten has worked out that grooming is pleasant. Teaching your kitten about grooming *dramatically* reduces the risk of hairballs later in life.



Cat Slicker Brush

- **Play with your kitten.** Teach kitten that fingers are NOT toys, and which toys are OK and which (like curtains) are not. Kittens need at least 20 minutes per day of face to face play time with humans.

Thanks to James Powell, & Seki Cattery for the great photos to share! This advice is of a general nature and is not a substitute for professional assistance. © Pets Australia 2012 Become a member of Pets Australia today!

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- **Teach your kitten about humans** by exposing them to as many humans as you can – children, adults, elderly people, loud people, quiet people, the vet, the groomer, and the neighbours. That way your adult cat will be less likely to “hate men” or “hate children” and more likely to enjoy human company – which is why we have pets in our lives!
- **Teach your kitten about other species** and especially other species that you call pets (including wild pets). Introduce them slowly to household dogs (make sure kitten has an escape route in case doggy tries any stunts), the fish tank, birds in cages etc. It increases the chance of family harmony later.
- **Teach your kitten about other cats** by attending kitten classes, usually at your local vet surgery or groomer. Being swatted and played with by a few other kittens is a great learning experience.
- **Teach your kitten about a wide variety of foods** by allowing kitty to taste new tastes as a small part of a constant base diet. Changing diets completely can cause stomach upsets, but small tidbits of liver, kidney, chicken, fish, mince, meat juices, lactose free milk, egg and cheese in kittenhood really reduces the risk of fussy eating later.



- **Teach your kitten about travel crates** by leaving the door open and a food treat or toy inside – letting him get used to it at his own pace before closing the door or lifting it.
- **Teach your kitten that he has his own safe spaces** by giving him a quiet, cosy sleeping area out of the way of kids, other pets – and give him time to sleep. He needs his sleep to process all this new information and to grow. Give him litter boxes in quiet, safe places so his toileting isn't disturbed.

Take your time and avoid frightening your kitten! Frightening experiences at this age also tend to stay with your cat for life. Use positive reinforcement like happy words and plenty of food or toy treats. Punishing your cat will tend to make him fearful and distrusting.

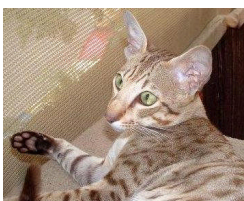
The Hard Way – Waiting Till Later in Life.

There is evidence that the kitten's socialising period lasts ONLY till 10 weeks of age. This is the time when kittens trust their queen or their owners to try new experiences 'with an open mind'. After this age, it can be really difficult to introduce your cat comfortably to new experiences. For kittens that are raised by their mothers past 10 weeks of age, the mother's experiences are passed onto the kittens – experiences that might include fear or aggression to humans, fear of water, food fussiness, or aggression to other cats.

While it's *possible* to introduce your kitten to new experiences after 10 weeks of age, it takes longer and can be progressively more difficult with increasing age, as their 'personality type' becomes increasingly fixed.

If a kitten is more than 6 months old, their “personality” should be close to fully developed and you can use the ASPCA's 'Felineality' test to help you identify the cat that suits your family culture best. There is a fun client handout on developing “personality type” in cats; which looks at how much a cat enjoys being patted and held; how they adapt to new experiences, and how playful they are.

It's All Up To YOU!



Taking the time to socialise your kitten BEFORE 10 weeks of age increases the chance that your kitten grows up to be a confident, playful cat that enjoys new experiences, is easily handled and groomed, and can go with you to your favourite places. You can extend this training to basic tricks as well!

Cats are great pets far in excess of what Australian culture tends to think they are capable of. Taking the time now means that you will have the cat that best fits your family.