



Society for the Friends of Ferals

Helping the Helpless

Surviving Kittenhood

Here are some basic ways to prepare for your new kitten and gain valuable knowledge to make you a better owner:

ONE: ANTICIPATE BEHAVIORS

Kittens are best socialized by their mothers and by responsible owners during “sensitive learning period” between 2 and 7 weeks of age.

Kittens who do not have good experiences with humans during that time, or who are not taught the basics of feline etiquette often become shy and antisocial with people or even other animals. People who adopt such kittens will find it harder to earn their trust. But you can engineer individual friendships through patient training, including hand feeding.

At 4 or 5 months, kittens start to turn into small cats, playing chase and object games. At 5 to 9 months, depending on when the individual kitten reaches puberty, play behaviors turn more to marking, mounting and dominance. Kittens will jump on each other, wrestle and establish a social pecking order. If you don't have a couple of cats, a kitten will typically turn to you - attaching your hands and feet.

You may also be ambushed by your kitten when he is rehearsing instinctive predatory behaviors like stalking, pouncing, springing and clawing. You can redirect those play-predatory rehearsals with cat toys, but better yet, get another kitten!

TWO: REDIRECT UNDESIRE BEHAVIORS

All kittens need to learn that you won't give in to attention-seeking demands. A kitten clawing at the bedroom door or crying in the middle of the night will stop after a few days if the behavior isn't successful because you ignore him. The trick is to not reinforce the kitten's ploy for attention.

Punishment doesn't work well to counter attention-seeking behaviors. A kitten just doesn't understand and it could ruin the relationship. Better to keep the misbehaving kitten in his own room at night for awhile, providing assorted toys and treats, food, water and litter box. Make it a “fun room” with hiding and climbing spots. Through the house, offer varied scratching posts and safe places for a kitten to explore.



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THREE: LITTER BOX

The rule is to provide as many litter boxes as you have cats, plus one. With a solitary kitten, put at least two boxes in places that the kitten can easily find and get into. Show the kitten where the litter boxes are and even place him gently inside, but don't force his paws to dig or put his nose in the litter. Later, if you want to move the litter box to a place that is more appropriate for you, be aware that a cat wants a quiet, private place – not near its food or sleeping areas.

FOUR: TOYS

Kittens are hot-wired to enjoy toys that “move” or (apparently) try to escape. Buy interactive toys with things that dangle and balls that can be batted or carried. Plan on giving at least 20 to 30 minutes of playtime each day or you'll think your kitten's gone crazy if you don't give him that aerobic workout. Also, get your kitten sturdy and varied scratching posts.

In addition, train your kitten to accept a carrier, to make trips to the veterinarian easier. Let the kitten inspect an open carrier seeded with toys or treats. Gradually extend his time inside. Then slowly get him used to motion by taking short car trips and rewarding him when you return home.