



Raising a Well Socialized Cat

© San Diego Humane Society. All rights reserved.

Introducing your kitten to a variety of experiences while they are young will help them be more comfortable later. This guide shares what are appropriate experiences to introduce your kitten to and at what age.

Feline Ages

First Two Weeks

Kittens have their eyes and ears closed from 0-2 weeks of age. Their main focus during this time is to grow. Mom's attention does play some role in their developing behavior and health.

Two to Three Weeks

When their eyes open around week 2, they start to explore a bit more and you start to see them interacting with each other, with mom and with novel objects in their environment. They may hiss at new objects but they aren't very scary yet (don't tell them that!). People should be handling them at this point, gently: touching their paws, ears, tail, holding them and stroking their backs. Background noises should play in the background once in a while at low levels. Sounds like street noises, dogs barking, babies, vacuums and other noises they may hear throughout their lives can be found on YouTube to play for a few hours a day. You won't see true play or interaction with each other or people until the end of week 3 to the beginning of week 4, as they become more developed and coordinated.

Around 3-4 weeks they will start eliminating on their own and it will be time to introduce them to litter boxes. We want to provide a variety of kitten-safe substrates so they get used to different kinds of litter and litter boxes: try plastic litter boxes, cardboard litter boxes, metal litter boxes, non-clumping litter of different grain size, etc. We'll also start introducing them to canned food.

Four Weeks

At four weeks we increase their socialization protocols. We are now touching their paws and maybe gently squeezing their toes, then giving them a treat. We are holding them and feeding them baby food or wet food. We are pulling on their tails and then feeding them wet food. Remember - do the action, and then give the treat! All of this will get them more comfortable for handling for tasks such as nail trims, vet exams, grooming and more!

Around 4 weeks of age we will introduce them to the crate, riding in the car and being taken places in the crate. We do this by feeding them in the crate, dropping treats in the crate periodically and gradually increasing the amount of time the door is closed. Once they willingly run right into the crate, we will start lifting the crate, bringing them to a new room and letting them out. Then we will increase the amount of time they spend and the different activities we take them to do in the crate: car rides, vet visits, walks around the neighborhood (safely!). If the



kittens seem interested in what's going on outside - they are at the front of the crate looking out, relaxed or alert body, but not tense or cowering, the crate may not need to be covered. If they seem a bit nervous, cover the crate with a towel and keep sessions short. For more information on crate training, see our crate training article and video on the website.

Five to Six Weeks

As they get even older, five to six weeks, we'll start increasing the restraint practice and start introducing them to nail clippers. We can lay them on their sides and give them baby food or wet food in a syringe to teach them that veterinary handling isn't as scary as it seems.

This handling should continue (with treats!) as long as they stay relaxed during it. If they start to struggle or avoid it, decrease the pressure and the type of handling and work our way back up. These exercises should continue in the home when adopted at 8 weeks as long as the kitten stays relaxed. Kitten socialization periods don't last as long as dogs, but they can still be open to new positive experiences at a young age.

Another thing that should be a priority at a young age (whether these are foster kittens or owned kittens) is meeting strangers in a positive way. Kittens should be allowed to approach strangers on their own and get treats for coming up to visit. Another great way to build a positive rapport with strangers is playing with wand toys! Young kittens should meet all kinds of people: adults, kids, people with hats, with beards, with skirts, tall people, short people, and kids of all ages.

How to play with your kittens and determining the type of play and toys they like

Some cats prefer "air games" and some prefer "land games" and some like both! To determine this, have a wand toy (a toy with a plastic or wooden handle (like a fishing pole!) with string attaching a toy to the end) and try making it fly and see if kitten chases it. Then try making it crawl on the ground and hide behind things, slowly "sneaking" out from hiding as if it was a mouse or lizard. Move slowly and quickly, up and down to see what your cat prefers to chase. Try different types of toys - some wand toys have feathers, others have fuzzy cloth at the end and still others have raffia or other grass. There's a wide variety out there, so try a few different things. Some cats love playing fetch, others watch the toy go away and then turn to look at you as if to say "silly human, why did you let it get away?" Keep trying until you figure out what they like but don't put it too close in their face, especially if they are shy, as we don't want to scare them. When you are done playing, make sure to give your cat a treat or a meal to mimic what happens in the "wild:" hunt, kill, eat, groom, sleep! This should also help you get some peace and quiet from them at night.

If they aren't engaging in play, there may be a variety of reasons; they may be shy, overwhelmed by the environment, there may be too much going on, they may not feel well, they may not like the toy or the way the toy is moving. Keep trying!



How to determine the type of treats your kitten likes

Same testing process goes with treats. Have a variety at hand. Try wet food in a syringe or on a popsicle stick or spoon, try meat based baby food, tuna, boiled chicken, store bought treats, soft or crunchy treats, etc. Try putting them on the ground. Try putting them in a dish. See what your cat gets most excited about and what they eat. Take notes and have more than one on hand during training sessions - this helps them not get too bored or wander off because they never know what they'll get next!

Socialization Checklist

You can use this, or something like it, to check off experiences your cat has. Try to provide most (80%) of these each week or so. This list is not exhaustive, you can add your own to the column at the bottom. The handling should be daily.

Action	Kitten's Reaction	Action	Kitten's Reaction
Touch all 4 paws Pick up all 4 paws Squeeze toes Squeeze nail clipper Clip nails		Noises: Baby sounds Street sounds Sirens Vacuum Blender Dog sounds Thunder/Fireworks Doorbell	
Touch tail Pull tail gently		New people: Men Women Children of all ages Different ethnicities Bearded men People moving suddenly People wearing hats	
Touch ears Pull on ears Stick finger in ears		Syringe feed baby food (as if to give medication)	
Pick up Pick up and hold		Crate	
Lay on side		Harness	
Wipe body with towel Cover with towel Pick up and hold with towel		Vet visits Put on table Scale Pinch skin (as if to give a vaccine)	



Other: <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>			
-----------------------------------	--	--	--

If you have a pet behavior question or would like some training assistance,
San Diego Humane Society is here to help!
Visit our website at www.sdhumane.org to view our behavior and training options,
or call our **Behavior Helpline at 619-299-7012 ext. 2244** to speak with a trainer.