

Kitten Behaviour Guide



Welcome

You have just brought your new kitten home, and are looking forward to many years of companionship. You understand that your new pet is dependent on you for all of its needs and you want to do the best for it. Perhaps you have owned cats before and are already aware of some of the characteristics of this fascinating species or perhaps you are new to owning a cat and have yet to unravel the mystery of our feline friends.

Although dogs and cats are the most commonly owned pets in the UK, it is important to remember that they are not the same and their pet care requirements are very different. If your kitten is to grow up to be a happy and contented adult you will not only need to take care of its physical needs, but also give it every opportunity to express its normal behaviour.

Independent but rewarding

There are many aspects of feline behaviour which make cats ideally suited to life in the modern world. Their reputation as independent creatures is well deserved and for many owners this characteristic is often very appealing. The cat can be happy to cope with periods of separation from its owners and may happily amuse itself when human company is not available. However, if well socialised, it also rises to the challenge of modern pet ownership by responding well to positive interaction with its owners when company is available.

In order to maximise your role as a good owner, it is important to look at life from a feline perspective and appreciate how their different perception of the world around them alters their view of us. Their enhanced sense of hearing, smell and touch coupled with their innate desire to hunt makes them a unique species with very specific needs.



Socialisation

Although cats can learn to appreciate and value human company, their evolution from solitary-living wild cats to domesticated pets means that they do not have a fundamental requirement for social interaction. Therefore, to ensure that kittens mature into rewarding pets, it is important they are given adequate and appropriate socialisation with people.

The most important time in a kitten's development for learning to interact in a social context with other cats, people and other domestic species (including the dog) is called the 'socialisation period'. This vital learning occurs from the second to the seventh week of life. For most kittens this period will be spent at the breeder's premises and therefore it is important to select a breeder that pays adequate attention to the socialisation process. Those kittens who have received a good foundation in human interaction at this early age are more likely to adapt quickly to life in a domestic environment and are less likely to develop behavioural problems, such as fear, anxiety and aggression to people.

Although the developmental period is generally from weeks two to seven, this period is flexible and it is important to continue their socialisation development once your kitten comes to live with you at two or three months of age.

There are a number of factors that are important in teaching kittens that human company is worthwhile. These include the amount of handling that they receive during their socialisation period, the style of that handling and the number of handlers. It has been shown that handling kittens for up to one hour per day, touching them all over, lifting and carrying them and gently restraining them, is the best way of getting them used to the normal types of human contact they are likely to experience as adults. When this handling is carried out by at least four different people, kittens will learn to generalise their acceptance of human contact rather than learn to tolerate interaction with one specific individual.

The social behaviour of your kitten is not only determined by its experience; the influence of the queen and the tom cat must also be considered. If the queen is a well socialised cat, her presence will help to increase the confidence of her kittens and to make them more exploratory in their behaviour. In turn this makes them more likely to seek social contact and benefit from human socialisation. The tom cat also has an influence on the behaviour of his offspring; bold and friendly fathers have been shown to be more likely to produce kittens that are well adapted for domestic life, both in terms of social interaction and confidence. It is therefore very important to select your kitten according to the behaviour of its parents, if possible, as well as its own behaviour and appearance.

Examples of commonly seen problems include showing fear reactions such as hiding or defensive aggression towards people, other family pets or the environment. If you have any concerns about your kitten in terms of socialisation or you have noticed any behavioural problems, consult your veterinary surgeon as early as possible.

In order to maximise our relationship with cats, we are often tempted to encourage the retention of many juvenile and kitten – like behaviours. This can be fine to a point, however excessive displays of behaviour such as suckling and kneading can indicate a more serious underlying behavioural disorder.

In cases where the kitten sucks on clothing or on human flesh, it is important to seek behavioural advice. When this behaviour is combined with displays of fear or aggression you should talk to your veterinary surgeon.

Training

The independent nature of the cat leads most people to assume that there is little that they can do to influence their pet's behaviour and often don't even consider the issue of training. However, cats do need to learn how to behave and common examples of training include teaching kittens to use a litter tray or a cat flap, introducing the cat to travel in a cat basket and training cats to come when they are called.

In addition to specific training, kittens also need to learn how to control their own behaviour and limit potential injury to others. Part of this process involves learning that the use of teeth and claws is not acceptable when interacting with owners and other pets, and it is therefore very important not to encourage their use during play. Games which involve running fingers over the back of the sofa, or teasing the kitten with feet beneath the duvet, should be avoided and play should instead be directed on to appropriate toys. Kittens learn target preferences for natural predatory behaviour early on and a kitten chasing fingers could escalate into a severe inappropriate but natural predatory response in adult cats which would not be welcome.

Teaching appropriate behaviours from an early age is always preferable to reprimanding unsuitable behaviour and in the case of the cat this is particularly true. For a creature which has no innate need for social contact, punishment is entirely inappropriate and runs the risk of seriously damaging the pet-owner relationship.

The Importance of Territory

Cats are territorial creatures and in order to be content in life they need to be secure within their home and to feel comfortable and at ease within their wider territory. The feline territory is divided into a number of areas and each of these has a specific function in terms of behaviour. The centre of the cat's territory is often termed as its core territory and within this area the cat will engage in feeding, playing and sleeping activity. This part of the territory should be very secure and free from unwanted intrusion from other cats. It is common for different cats within the same household to refuse to share their core territory and it is important to consider providing distinct areas where each individual can feel safe and secure with free access to important resources such as food, water and resting places. It is also the case that cats in a multi-cat household who are not keen to share food bowls would also prefer to have separate litter tray facilities, in separate locations in the house.

Cats live in a three-dimensional world and one very useful way of increasing the space that is available is to offer high up resting places in the form of radiator cradles, shelves and tops of wardrobes. Being high up helps to resolve stress for cats and it is often the case that cats in multi-cat homes will select to rest at different levels, as well as in different areas, of the home. However, it is not only multi-cat households that need secure feline resting places. All cats need to be provided with a safe bolt hole which they can retreat to for a bit of peace and quiet. Right from the very first day, your kitten should be provided with a secure core territory and allowed time to rest totally undisturbed by the children, the dog or any other members of the household.

Beyond the core territory, a cat will define a home range and a hunting range and for most domestic pets these areas will include the garden and surrounding areas. In order to avoid unnecessary interaction with other cats in the neighbourhood, and to reassure the individual of its right to occupy the area, cats will use scent markers to define specific passage tracks through the territory. These marks may take the form of facial secretions, which are deposited during facial rubbing, or urine or faeces, which are deposited as a form of communication rather than an act of toileting. Facial marks will also be used within the home environment and the sight of a cat rubbing up against a piece of furniture or a doorway within the home tells you that he is depositing scent signals which will reassure him and familiarise him with the indoor territory. Deposition of urine or faeces as markers within the home is not to be expected and when it does occur, it is important to assess why the individual cat feels the need to use such deliberate markers within what should be seen as a secure environment.

If your cat does start marking within your home or your cat is showing signs of anxiety such as hiding, hypervigilance or excessive grooming, it is important to consider the potential reasons for a lack of confidence in the environment. At this stage, be sure not to inadvertently remove your cat's security signposts by excessively cleaning the facial markers that have been placed through rubbing on strategic walkways and furniture within the house or perhaps by accidentally blocking access to a previous favourite resting place such as the top of a wardrobe.



CORE TERRITORY

Eat, sleep, play
Your house

HOME RANGE

Marking and toileting
Garden +/- other gardens

HUNTING RANGE

High incidence of marking, hunting, scratching
1-3 miles from core territory



Toilet training

Cats are generally regarded as being clean creatures and their fastidious nature endears them to many people. Indeed the lack of house training demands from kittens gives them a considerable advantage over the puppy in the eyes of many owners and is a significant factor in their increasing popularity.

This reputation is a well founded one and so it is all the more disappointing for a cat owner to find that their cat is not clean. Avoiding problems relating to house training relies on providing your cat with access to suitable latrine facilities. Indoor cats will need to be given a litter tray for this purpose and even outdoor cats may also need to or prefer to use a litter tray from time to time.

Since cats are naturally nocturnal creatures and are likely to want to use the facilities while the rest of the household is sleeping, it is important for a cat's latrine facilities to be available both day and night. The location of the tray must be acceptable to the cat, as must the type of litter that is used, and it is important to consider these factors from a feline and not a human perspective.

If children are playing in the same room as the tray or the family dog is liable to come over and sniff the cat on its litter, then the location of the tray should be considered. This is not only important on health grounds but also because a cat needs to feel safe and secure in its latrine and any threats to that security could lead to breakdowns in house training.

Very simple alterations in the litter facilities can often lead to problems of house soiling and the first thing to consider if urine or faeces are being deposited in the home is why the litter tray facilities are not acceptable. There are a variety of trays available on the market and it is important to get one that the individual cat accepts.

CHOOSING A LITTER TRAY

The basic variations between the trays relate to the dimensions of the pan and to the presence or absence of a hood and the choice is very much dependant on personal preference as well as the size of the cat. The type of litter material which is used in the tray can also dramatically affect behaviour and in general the finer, softer litters are better tolerated than the harder, pelleted versions, although many owners do of course use this type quite successfully. It is also usually best to consider an unscented litter. Research has shown that cats prefer a depth of about 3cm of litter to allow them to show their natural digging and covering behaviour. Whilst it is important for your cat to build up an association with their tray, it is important for their litter facilities to be hygienically maintained and cleaned regularly. However, excessive cleaning, especially in the early days, can lead to some disruption and confusion.

INAPPROPRIATE TOILETING BEHAVIOUR

If your cat does begin to deposit urine or faeces in unacceptable locations, it is very important to differentiate between the cat messing and marking. There are a few indicators which can help you to do that;

- > The posture of the cat will hold some clues as to the motivation for the behaviour, with toileting cats adopting a squatting position and marking cats adopting a very characteristic spraying posture.
- > The reaction of your cat to the litter facilities may also be relevant, with marking cats continuing to use the tray without any problems and toileting cats showing a very noticeable alteration in their reaction toward the facilities.

If you do have problems relating to cleanliness with your cat it is important for you to seek advice from your veterinary surgeon at the earliest opportunity since the earlier these problems are diagnosed the easier they are to treat. It is vital to rule out possible medical causes of inappropriate toileting or marking.

Hunting for Fun?

One very common misconception amongst cat owners is that feeding their cat and ensuring the cat is never hungry will protect birds and wildlife. In reality, the motivation to hunt has absolutely nothing to do with hunger and this makes very good sense in terms of the cat's need to survive. Cats have always been solitary hunters and if they wait until they are hungry before they try to detect and dispatch prey they run a very high risk of dying from starvation. After all, prey may simply be unavailable when hunger strikes. Instead the cat is tuned for the kill at all times so when movement and sound combine, their strong natural instinct means that even the best fed cannot resist the desire to pounce.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY

In the wild, cats will spend up to six hours a day hunting and so, for domesticated cats, play with toys is a vital outlet for hunting behaviour, allowing them to practice their natural eyeing, stalking and pouncing behaviour. They should also be given the chance to catch and dispatch some of these prey items and toys must be suitable for this purpose – be sure that toys do not run any risk of fragmenting or breaking when the cat attempts to 'kill' them. In order to trigger this natural hunting instinct, toys should also combine sound and movement. For example, balls of tinfoil which catch the light and make a rustling sound as they roll are a cheap way of creating ideal toys for the inquisitive cat but must be supervised in case of damage. Suspended toys which move erratically are also a highly rewarding way to encourage hunting behaviour. If you make the decision to keep your cat indoors you will need to be prepared to invest some considerable time in this activity.

A lack of opportunity to hunt imaginary prey can result in cats showing predatory behaviour toward any available moving objects in their environment, resulting in owner's hands, feet and ankles becoming common targets. This is especially pertinent with indoor cats and owners should make efforts to provide appropriate outlets for this natural behaviour. If you encounter this problem, it is important to reassess your home through feline eyes and ensure that you are providing the right sort of stimulation for your cat. If the problems still continue do not hesitate to discuss them with your veterinary surgeon.

Scratching for pleasure

As a member of the cat family, your kitten needs to scratch as a way of staking out its territory, and shedding loose claws. Providing a 'scratching post' at an early age will help to divert this activity away from expensive furniture. Territory marking also occurs and when your kitten rubs itself up against you, it is marking you by means of its facial glands, with the calm familiarity of its own pheromones. Do not interfere.



Indoor cats

Cat owners are increasingly keeping their pets confined to indoors and this type of management requires special consideration. Owners should think very carefully about whether they have the time and energy to meet the high requirements of an indoor cat. Throughout the text above we have discussed the importance of allowing cats to express their natural behaviours, which is vital for their emotional well-being and also to prevent behavioural problems.

If cats are confined to indoors, the owner becomes entirely responsible for supplying these behavioural and emotional needs through creating an appropriate environment with significant levels of mental and physical stimulation. Indoor cats often enjoy 'hunting' for their food by the use of activity feeders placed around the house in place of a food bowl. You should also pay particular attention to increasing the 3D space to allow increased exploratory behaviour and physical activity. Introducing novel items for the cat to explore is also important as long as your cat is confident and relaxed.

It is also important to bear in mind the territory lay-out and remember that the core area is for eating, sleeping and playing but not for toileting. The litter trays should be placed well away from the feeding area. Owners should also ensure that water is supplied in an area separate to the food as in the wild, cats would not naturally drink close to where they eat due to the risk of the water being contaminated. Outdoor cats are able to access water more easily and choose their own locations such as ponds, puddles and bird baths. Indoor cats often prefer to drink from a running tap or a very full water bowl so consider a pet water fountain or leaving a full bowl inside a sink or bath for the cat to freely access.



Introducing your new kitten to the household

Hopefully all the information above about the requirements of a cat will help you to introduce your cat appropriately to his or her new environment, including other household pets and children. Please see below for some other important tips to bear in mind.

INTRODUCING YOUR NEW KITTEN TO AN EXISTING HOUSEHOLD CAT

- > If you already have another cat it is very important that the introduction of a kitten takes into account the core territory layout of your existing pet.
- > Cats are not innately social creatures so are likely to see the new arrival as a territorial threat and new owners may be disappointed that their existing cat does not welcome the new arrival with open paws.
- > Scent is the most important sense to cats and it is very helpful to allow the existing cat and the new kitten to learn about each other via scent before a visual encounter.
- > Ensure each cat has its own separate safe core area with its own access to important resources (food, water, resting places, litter tray facilities, access to cat flap for existing cat).
- > Allow each cat to explore the other cat's area in the absence of the other cat. This allows them to learn about the other cat via scenting.
- > You can also transfer scent between the cats by using your hands or clothes to stroke one cat and then stroke the other cat without washing your hands.
- > After a few days or even a week the cats should have sufficient information about each other that you can try a visual encounter but this must be done in a controlled manner to ensure no accidental aggressive outbursts.
- > It is best to place the kitten within the safety of a large puppy crate, or if one is not available then a cat carrier. The kitten can then be brought into the same area as the existing cat at a distance. Keep this meeting brief and never force interaction between the cats.
- > Repeat these controlled meetings frequently for short amounts of time. Once the cats are relaxed in each other's presence you can try a meeting without the cage. It can be a good idea to distract each cat with some physical interaction and rewarding them for relaxed behaviour.
- > Historically people have advised the use of food in teaching cats to tolerate each other's presence but this is now thought to be inappropriate as cats are not social eaters and should not be deliberately brought into close proximity to eat.
- > It is also worth considering the use of a pheromone plug-in diffuser to help create a relaxing atmosphere for both cats. It is vital these are used appropriately so please discuss this with your vet.

INTRODUCING YOUR NEW KITTEN TO NON-FELINE HOUSEHOLD MEMBERS

- > This is usually more straightforward than introducing your kitten to another cat.
- > It is vital that your kitten is allowed to explore in his own time. Never force interaction with social or inanimate objects.
- > If you have a dog then ensure that the dog is under strict supervision and control during initial interactions. Even a dog who has previously lived with cats may be triggered into a chase response if the kitten runs away. This must be avoided at all costs because chase behaviour is highly internally rewarding and can be difficult to stop once the dog has enjoyed the fun of the chase. One suggestion is to take your dog out for a good long walk and then keep him on his lead when he comes back into the house. You can then ask him to sit and quietly reward him with his favourite food treats for sitting calmly whilst the kitten is brought into the room at a distance. Just as with introducing to another cat, these meetings should be short and frequent until you are sure both the dog and kitten are relaxed in each other's presence.
- > Children also may need to be introduced carefully depending on their age, experience of interacting with animals and the previous experience of the kitten. A kitten who has come from a family breeding environment and has met children from a young age will usually adapt well. If the kitten has come from a quieter, child-free environment you may need to take things more gradually.
- > The most important point to remember with all introductions is to allow the kitten to avoid situations that scare him and to give him the time and patience to adapt.

Living with a happy and contented cat is a great source of pleasure and taking the time to provide our cats with the environmental stimulation that they require is an important part of the responsibilities of a cat owner. The rewards of cat ownership are numerous and you will have hours of fun watching your kitten at play. The bond that forms between you will be a source of peace and amusement and research shows that owning a cat can also be good for your health. However, problems can arise and if your cat begins to exhibit any behaviour which causes you concern you should not hesitate to contact your veterinary surgeon to discuss it and consider referral to an appropriately qualified behaviourist such as a member of the Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors (www.apbc.org.uk) or a Certified Clinical Animal Behaviourist (www.asab.nottingham.ac.uk/accred/reg.php)

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