

SOCIALISATION OF A NEW CAT

What is socialisation?

Socialisation is the process by which the kitten learns about its own identity, the identity of its own species and the identity of the other species with which it will share its life. Appropriate socialisation enables the kitten to go on to develop relationships with other living beings in its environment.

What is habituation?

As all animals develop there are numerous stimuli (sounds, smells, sights and events) that they need to become accustomed to in their environment. If kittens do not encounter these stimuli and place them in their frame of reference for the world around them then the stimuli can induce fear and anxiety when they are encountered later in life. Habituation is the process whereby cats get used to a wide variety of stimuli, and stop reacting to them provided that there are no untoward consequences.

Why are these terms important?

Cats that receive insufficient exposure to and contact with people, other animals and new environments during the first two months of life may develop irreversible fears, leading to timidity or aggression. It is vital to expose your kitten to as many stimuli (people, places and things), when it can most effectively socialise with and habituate to these stimuli. The first two months of life are the most important period in the social development of the cat.

Are cats a social species?

Although they are fairly independent and can do well on their own, cats are a social species. Feline social behaviour has not been as extensively studied as that of the dog but it is well known that the domestic cat is much more social than has been reported traditionally. There are many situations where cats live together in groups and interact in a friendly manner. The composition of these groups differs from dog groupings. Usually they consist of mothers, daughters, aunts and grandmothers; female cats that are related. In large colonies, there may be many smaller related groups sharing the same space. Male cats will leave the group and live very much on the periphery, but return for breeding. Males that have been neutered join the group in much the same way as females. Colonies of feral cats will be found in areas where food is abundant such as barns or dumps or around fishing ports. The cats in the group will allogroom (lick each other) and allomark (rub on each other). They will also share the raising of kittens, often fostering others from different litters.

Do cats have "personalities"?

Research has shown that it may be possible to classify cat "personalities". One study identified cats that were shy, timid or fearful and those that were confident. The timid cats took significantly longer to approach people and would stay with the person for significantly less time than the confident cats. Another study identified cats that were "shy" and those that were "trusting". That research noted that trusting cats were trusting regardless of where they encountered people, while shy cats were more fearful the further from home they were when people were presented. Based on these and other studies two common personality types have been identified: (a) sociable, confident and outgoing; (b) timid, shy and unfriendly. Some other research has also suggested a third personality type: (c) active and aggressive.

How does the mother cat (or queen) teach her kittens?

Cats are very good at observational learning. This occurs when an animal watches a behaviour being performed by another. The queen starts to teach her kittens at a young age. From the queen, kittens learn about elimination behaviour and predatory behaviour preferences. Kittens will begin to spend time in the litter tray at about 30 days of age and will learn appropriate litter usage through a combination of certain olfactory (smell) cues and observation of the queen. If allowed access to prey, the queen will begin to bring them to her offspring at about 32 - 36 days of age and teach them to hunt. The kittens will also begin to be weaned and eat solid food at the same age. Play between kittens is also an important part of social development in early life, particularly for those kittens that will be housed with other cats later in life.

What can I do to improve my chances of having a social non-fearful cat?

a) Selection: The genetics of an individual cat plays a critical role in how sociable, playful, fearful or excitable a kitten will become. The first issue in helping to ensure that a kitten will be friendly and social when it grows up is to choose an appropriate kitten for your family. Since cats have a variety of personality types, the question is whether these personality types can be determined at the time of selection. Of course the development of the personality is a multifactorial affair and one that is very dynamic. A number of issues must therefore be considered.

What influences the development of personality type? Not surprisingly studies have confirmed that not only is personality inherited from the mother, but that it is in part, inherited from the father. In particular there is a strong paternal component to the boldness aspect of a cat's personality and the presence of boldness will increase the kittens exploratory nature and can make it a more interactive and thus more sociable cat. It is important therefore to know about the cat's mother and its father when making your selection. In many cases of course this will not be possible.

In addition to genetics, the amount and style of early handling, the number of handlers and the methods of interactions around feeding are very important factors in the subsequent success of socialisation of kittens. The important stage of development for these issues is between two and seven weeks of age and it is termed the sensitive period of socialisation.

Knowledge of the breed, assessment of the kitten's parents and evaluation of the kitten's environment and upbringing are important considerations when selecting a kitten. Some important questions to ask are: Has there been adequate exposure to people, both adults and children? Has the kitten been handled frequently, preferably on a daily basis for at least 15 minutes? How does the kitten behave when picked up by prospective owners? Does it hiss, bite or scratch, or does the kitten purr and solicit affection? Does the kitten approach people or does it stand away? What has been the historical behaviour of the queen and tom? Did they hunt and/or have access to prey? Do they have a good history of litter usage, and what type of litter material is used? What are the feeding habits and preferences of the parents? General observation of the temperament of both the kittens in the litter and the parents is helpful. Are they outgoing, shy or timid? Assessment of young kittens is likely to be of limited value if the kittens are still progressing through the primary socialisation period, and the assessment of the parents may provide more useful information. Assessing older kittens and adult cats that have already passed through their primary socialisation period will provide much more accurate information.

b) Early handling: Kittens that are stimulated and handled from birth are more confident, more social, more exploratory, they mature faster and are better able to handle stress as they develop. Therefore, kittens obtained from a breeder or home where they have had frequent contact and interaction with the owners, provided that the contact has been appropriate, are likely to be more sociable and less fearful as they develop.

c) Attachment: The level of attachment that forms between people and cats is variable. The two most important factors appear to be the cat's genetic personality type and the amount of socialisation it receives during the sensitive period of socialisation, which is thought to be between two and seven weeks of age. Certainly, the greater exposure a kitten has to humans of all ages and to other pets, the better adjustment that kitten will have in its new home. The socialisation period starts and ends earlier in cats than in the dog and therefore the early environment is very important in determining future sociability. Early handling of kittens decreases their approach time to strangers and increases the amount of time that they stay with them. The more handling the better, but even limited handling for less than 15 minutes a day will positively affect later behaviour.

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

Your interaction with your new kitten begins during the ride home in the car and all cats should be transported in some kind of carrier in the car. When you get home you should place the kitten in a small, quiet area with water and a litter tray. If possible, duplicate the type of litter material used in the previous home.

When you start to introduce your kitten to the house you should begin the process very calmly and you should ensure that the first room you allow your new kitten to explore has been inspected for nooks and crannies where it might hide or get stuck. Often in a new environment, a kitten may look for a secluded place to hide. The kitten needs to be given time to investigate its new surroundings and the process can be helped by limiting the space available and initially supervising the kitten closely but not interfering with its investigations. After your new kitten has had some quiet time in a restricted location, you can slowly allow access to other areas of the home.

Kittens are natural explorers and in the first few weeks gradual access to the home will allow exploration as well as the ability to monitor the kitten's behaviour.

Play and handling

New kittens need plenty of outlets for play. Stalking and pouncing behaviours are important play behaviours in kittens and aid in neural and muscular development. If given sufficient outlets for these behaviours with toys and perhaps a playmate, kittens will be less likely to use humans as their targets. Good toys are ones that move rapidly and are light enough to be picked up, but large enough so that they are not swallowed. Never use your hands or body parts for play. This can lead to dangerous play and human injury.

Depending on the personality and early experiences as a kitten, your cat may either enjoy, accept, or dislike, certain types of handling from stroking to bathing. In order for the cat to learn to accept and enjoy a variety of types of physical contact from humans, it is important that the human hand is only associated with positive experiences and that all physical punishment is avoided. You should 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 more intense sessions can be practised. Handling your cat in this way can be used to help the cat become accustomed to, and perhaps enjoy, patting, grooming, teeth brushing, claw cutting and even bathing. Never force 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.