



## Got Kitten? Early Education to Prevent Problems is the Key!

### Introduction

Because of their big hearts, many people take in stray kittens or other cats that no one wants. Sometimes a stray turns out to be the best cat imaginable. *In other cases, this kitten has had a rocky beginning that will manifest in behavior problems immediately or down the road.*

### Early socialization

Kittens enter their primary socialization period at 2 - 3 weeks of age. This is when the brain is primed for attachment to other beings. In the wild, this is when the kitten learns who are family and friends. Beginning around 7 weeks of age, this willingness to accept others decreases. The socialization period is over by about 12 weeks of age. If kittens are not regularly handled by humans before 12 weeks of age, they may be forever "skittish" around new people. These poorly socialized cats can gradually learn to accept individual people, but only after a lengthy period of trust building. Ironically, after this trust is developed, these supposedly "skittish" cats can become highly bonded to these few human companions. The early positive learning experiences with the mother cat and siblings has a tremendous impact on the kittens future adult cat personality. *Ideally, during the first 12 weeks of life, the kitten is handled gently by people on a daily basis, exposed in non-frightening ways to other pets, children, and household appliances.*

### Kitten gentling

The goal of kitten gentling is to develop a gentle friendly adult cat. Gentling can begin immediately after birth. Although the eyes and ears are non-functional, the newborn kitten has a sense of smell. It is desirable for the kitten to imprint early on the smell of humans. *Ideally, the kitten would be picked up and gently massaged and rolled and cuddled in various positions for about 60 seconds per day.*

### Start out on the right paw...

The most important thing to do when you bring home a new cat or kitten is to confine him or her in a small room such as a bathroom. Put food and letterbox at opposite sides of the room. Add a cushy bed near the food and water, up high if possible. Keep the cat confined for at least a few days. *Spend as much time as possible in the room with the kitten or cat.*

### Multiple cats

If there are other cats in the house, extend the number of rooms available or the time in the whole house gradually. Cats naturally seek out and claim territory. Too much too soon can overwhelm the new cat, create cat fights, and lead to behavior problems. If you have more than one cat, feed cats on either sides of the door where the new cat is confined. Do NOT allow a new cat outdoors. *Cats can NOT always find their way home.*

### Begin with a veterinary exam

Most people would not buy a car before getting it checked out by a mechanic. BEFORE you adopt a kitten, or on the FIRST day of the adoption, take the kitten to a veterinarian for a thorough check up. Before all vaccinations, begin with blood tests to rule out feline leukemia and AIDS. These diseases are highly contagious to other cats. If your kitten has one of these lifetime diseases, you will need to be strict about keeping the kitten indoors at all times. *Bring in a fecal sample for a visual and microscopic test for parasites.*

### **Cats like things clean...**

Not cleaning the litterbox frequently enough often leads to inappropriate and misdirected elimination. For homes with more than one cat, not offering multiple types of litter and box size and locations often results in house soiling. Plan to clean the litterbox every morning and evening. *An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure!*

### **Prevent cat aggression**

Physically punishing any feline act tends to make behavior worse! Allowing the cat up on the counters some of the time, then punishing the cat at other times confuses the cat and harms the relationship. One way to create an aggressive cat is to physically punish the cat, creating defensive aggression. Playing slap-boxing games also frequently results in cat aggression toward people. Because of their genetics, some cats can participate or tolerate these adolescent human games, and still not become aggressive. In this situation, the cat has taken over control of the situation. *Ironically, some beloved cats become so spoiled, they turn "dominant" and attack their owners.*

### **Food rewards**

Cats often respond well to food rewards. Cat treats should never make up more than 10% of the cat's diet. Before you feed your cat, practice a "come" command by saying the cat's name and the word "come" in a high happy tone. Then, give the cat the meal. Throughout the day, you can call the cat in the same way and give a food treat. To show the cat how this works, begin with a treat almost touching his or her nose. Say, "CatName, come," and move backwards keeping the treat right in front of the nose. If the cat follows the treat a few steps forward, offer the treat and praise. You can also use food treats to lure cats into a sit position and say the word "sit" to teach them a sit command. It's fun to train your cat. Try different things but only one command at a time until it is learned. ALWAYS use one word to mean the same thing. *NEVER punish poor results, ONLY encourage and praise. The goal is quality time together and bonding.*

### **House rules**

Decide from day one what your house rules will be. For example, most people do not want cats on the counter or tables. If the cat jumps up where he or she is not allowed, then make a hissing, shushing sound and clap your hands. If the cat responds quickly by jumping back down, praise and reward the cat. If your cat is very stubborn, you need to be sneaky and use a squirt gun to squirt the cat the minute it jumps up. Do NOT let the cat see you. When you are not home, try to make the counter and table inaccessible or unattractive by putting tin foil or contact paper - sticky side up - on these surfaces. Always provide one or more scratching posts and encourage and praise the cat for using it. Put catnip or treats on top of the posts to make them even more attractive to the cat. *Giving your cat this approved outlet for the need and enjoyment of sharpening their claws is one of the BEST WAYS to prevent cat destruction of furniture and drapes.*

### **Identification**

Start your kitten with a safety break-away nylon collar with an identification tag attached. Put your phone numbers on the tag. You can also write phone numbers on the collar. The best time to ID chip or tattoo your kitten is while your kitten is under anesthesia for a spay or neuter at 3 to 4 months of age. *Early spay or neuter is strongly recommended to help prevent the millions of unwanted kittens.*