

# Texas Veterinary Behavior Services

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## **BRINGING HOME A NEW KITTEN**

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Kittens begin learning and developing behaviors long before you bring them home. They continue to learn every day, and their interactions with you, other animals and the environment will shape their behavior. Without appropriate guidance and intervention, some of these behaviors may be objectionable to you. It is important to provide your kitten with a structured training routine from the beginning. Similar to children, kittens should have some leeway in their behavior, but behaviors that seem cute when the kitten is small (e.g. biting your hands during play) are likely to become painful or even dangerous as the cat grows. Kitten will not “grow out” of unacceptable behaviors; they must be taught acceptable alternatives.

Kitten kindergarten classes are offered in some communities and are a good way to socialize and begin training your kitten. Participating in these classes over a two to four week period can be very valuable to both you and your kitten. These classes help you establish consistent and proper interactions with your kitten during your normal daily routine, so that there is not a difference between “real life” and training. Kittens should be under 13 weeks of age, free of external parasites or infectious disease, and have at least one set of vaccinations.

### **Kitten Proofing Your Home**

Be prepared for your kitten’s curious behavior. Like a child, your kitten can get into a great deal of trouble in the blink of an eye. A good rule to follow is that anything that is not safe for children is not safe for pets. Keep kittens away from dangerous areas like the dryer and washing machine. Keep small items such as tinsel, rubber bands, buttons and beads out of reach — these pose the risk of causing intestinal obstruction. Store household cleaners and detergents or other chemical compounds and medicines properly and out of reach. Electrical cords can also be dangerous, so try to get them out of reach or wrap them in hard plastic to prevent your kitten from biting them. Kittens will crawl into small spaces and many a cat has gotten into the walls of the house, the attic or even drain pipes. In some cases the kitten then does not know how to get out on its own. Kittens may also climb up on high perches and then fall off and injure themselves. Do not allow your kitten to roam free in your house without supervision especially when it is young and small.

### **Socialization and Developmental Stages of Behavior**

Socialization is critical for all animals since this is how they learn to communicate and develop social relationships with people and other animals. This period begins in the third week of life (when the kitten’s eyes and ears are fully open) and extends through the seventh to ninth week of life. Kittens with inadequate socialization during this time may be fearful and nervous of other people and animals (including other cats) and may show avoidance and defensive behaviors when exposed to them. It is important during this time to expose your kitten to a variety of people and other animals in a safe manner so that these behaviors will be less likely to occur. Try to take your kitten to two new places each week and have them meet 5-10 new people each week. These goals can be met together...have them meet people while they are visiting a new place. Kittens should also be exposed to a variety of sights, sounds, odors and tastes at home.

The socialization period is also a good time to train your kitten to walk on a leash and get the kitten accustomed to the pet carrier. Because cats can become frightened in carriers during car rides, each cat in the household should have its own carrier. This avoids the risk of the cats fighting in the carrier and then continuing this aggression to each other once they are home again.

### **Early Handling and Restraint**

Early handling of kittens by people not only helps with socialization skills but also has been shown to accelerate physical and central nervous system development. Kittens held regularly during weeks three through seven of life are more likely to tolerate being handled later in life and are usually friendlier towards people in general. This also will help your cat during veterinary visits.

Teach your kitten to enjoy being touched and handled so he/she doesn't feel threatened, defensive or irritated. Start the lessons when your kitten is relaxed and begin by handling in ways the kitten finds pleasurable. Scratch behind the ears and stroke the top of his/her head. Lengthen the strokes to include more body. Work slowly and gently with your kitten always rewarding and praising your kitten for good behavior. You can pair these handling sessions with food treats as well to help reinforce the kitten for remaining calm while being handled. Train the kitten to allow you to look in his/her ears and mouth. You can also begin to get your kitten used to having his/her paws handled by gently taking hold of one paw and then scratch them behind the ear or give a treat. Repeat until your kitten begins to look forward to having his/her paws held.

### **Diet**

Cats can develop strong food taste and texture preferences if fed only one type of food. This can make changing the cat's diet in the future extremely difficult if the cat needs a special diet for medical reasons. Kittens should be exposed to a variety of foods when young to prevent this from happening.

### **Play Therapy and Cat Toys**

When cats play they exhibit exploratory, investigative and predatory behaviors. Play provides young cats with opportunities to practice skills they would normally need for survival. You can take the cat out of the jungle, but you can't take the jungle out of the cat. There is a little tiger in every house cat that will benefit from exercising hunting skills. We cannot ignore their basic need to practice this skill. Fortunately for us the prey does not have to be alive, but it must move.

Allow for several *scheduled* play sessions throughout the day. Never play with your kitten with your hands or other parts of your body including your hair. All play should be directed toward toys. During the session make the toy move as would prey—for example it could hide behind the chair and then suddenly jump out into the air. Allow your kitten plenty of "captures" to build his/her confidence and enthusiasm. "Hide and Seek" is a fun game for cats to play because "found" toys are often much more attractive than a toy that is just handed to them.

Provide several toys that offer a variety of uses – e.g. some to chase, some to attack. Toys that are good for rolling and batting at on the floor are plastic milk jug rings, shower curtain rings, plastic rolling balls with or without bells inside, ping pong balls or plastic golf balls, and even cardboard toilet paper or paper towel rolls. Catnip toys are also fun for cats. Not all cats are attracted to catnip because this is a genetically controlled trait. Also, kittens less than six months of age do not seem to be attracted to catnip like older kittens are. Catnip is safe for cats to roll in and eat and is not addictive. Soft stuffed animals are good toys to carry around or "hunt". Make sure it is a least half the size of the kitten since this will allow them to really get their paws around it to kick and bite it. Lastly, kittens love to hide and providing a box or even a bag for them to hide in is a good idea.

### **Managing Rough Play**

Play-motivated aggressive behaviors are common in young, active cats. If you play with a young kitten using your hands and/or feet instead of toys, the kitten is liable to learn that rough play with you is okay. Although this may be cute at first, when your hand has become the object of an attack and has been scratched and bloodied it ceases to be cute. Never encourage your kitten to play directly with hands, feet, or other body parts (including clothes). This encourages them to bite when petted and also to ambush people.

The previous section mentioned several toys that are appropriate for kittens. Redirect your kitten's aggressive behavior onto these toys when the kitten begins to play roughly. As mentioned earlier, try to set up three or four consistent times during the day to initiate play with your kitten. Use appropriate toys and be consistent in what is and is not considered acceptable behavior. If your kitten persists in attacking you even when a toy is provided, stop the game and walk away. You can try discouraging unacceptable behavior by using a squirt bottle filled with water or a can of pressurized air; however, there is some risk of teaching your cat to be fearful of you if this is done. Other methods are preferable to applying such punishments. In order for these tools to be effective, they must always be handy and the correction must be timed to precisely coincide with the inappropriate behavior. Squirting the cat as it is running away or after the cat has stopped biting will be counterproductive.

### **Litter Box Problem Prevention**

There's really no such thing as "litter-training" a kitten. The only thing you need to do is provide an acceptable, accessible litter box, using the suggestions below. It's not necessary to take your cat to the litter box and move his/her paws back and forth, as this may actually be an unpleasant experience for your cat and a negative association with the litter box may develop.

The litter box should be kept in a location that affords your cat some privacy, but is also conveniently located and easy for the kitten to reach. Research has shown that most cats prefer fine-grained clumping litters, presumably because they have a softer feel. Once you find a litter your cat likes, don't change types or brands especially abruptly. Many cats are put off by the odor of scented or deodorant litters and it is recommended that these be avoided. Litter box odor should not be a problem if the litter box is kept clean. There are new litters that have charcoal in them that can help cut down on box odor as well.

There should be at least one litter box per cat. Ideally there should be extra boxes as well; the more cats in the house, the more extra boxes there should be. This helps avoid the cat having to "wait in line" to use the box. You should also place them in several locations around the house, so that no one cat guards the litter box area preventing the other cats from accessing it. Covered litter boxes can pose problems for some cats. You may forget to clean the litter box, they trap odors inside, and they may not allow a large cat sufficient room to turn around, scratch, dig or position themselves. To meet the needs of the most discriminating cat, feces should be scooped out of the litter box at least once daily. Scoopable litter can go two to three weeks before the litter needs to be completely changed; however, other forms of litter should be changed weekly. Wash the litter box with mild soap and water when changing litter completely. In general, the litter should be at least 1-1/2 inches deep to allow the cat to adequately dig and cover the elimination.

Many medical conditions can cause a change in a cat's litter box habits. If your cat begins to eliminate outside the box, you should take your kitten to the veterinarian to rule out a medical issue such as parasites or bladder inflammation.

### **Furniture Scratching**

Cats scratch to remove the dead outer layer of their claws, to mark their territory by leaving both a visual mark and a scent (they have scent glands on their paws), to stretch their bodies and flex their feet and claws, and to work off energy. Scratching is a normal behavior and one that cats are highly motivated to display. For this reason, it is unrealistic to try to prevent the kitten from

scratching altogether. Instead, the goal in resolving scratching problems is to redirect the scratching onto acceptable objects. Declawing should be reserved as a last resort for cases that have not responded to the suggestions below. Trimming your kitten's claws will reduce any damage the kitten may do during the training process.

Start by observing the physical features of the objects your cat is scratching. The answers to the following questions will help you understand your cat's scratching preferences: where are they located, what texture do they have, what shape do they have, and how tall are they? Substitute similar objects near the inappropriate object already being used. Make sure the objects are stable and won't fall over or move around when the cat scratches particularly as the cat grows. Make the inappropriate objects unappealing by covering them with double sided sticky tape, aluminum foil, sheets of sandpaper, or a plastic carpet runner with the tacky point side up. Reward the kitten verbally or with food treats when you see the kitten using an appropriate object.

When your cat is consistently using the appropriate object, it can be moved slowly over time to a location more suitable, and the unappealing coverings on the inappropriate objects can be removed gradually. It is best, however, to keep the appropriate scratching objects as close to your cat's preferred scratching location as possible. Cats like to scratch and stretch when they awake from a nap so placing a scratching post near resting areas is helpful.

Do not physically punish your kitten for inappropriate scratching. Punishment after the fact, won't change the behavior, and may encourage defensive aggression. Punishment also does not teach your cat where it is acceptable to scratch. If you catch your kitten in scratching in an unacceptable area, you can try using a remote punishment. This could be something as easy as throwing a small bean bag, such as a hacky sac, near the kitten to distract him/her, using a water-filled squirt bottle, or making a loud noise such as clapping. These corrections work best if it is not obvious to the cat that you are the source of it (i.e. try to be discrete). This last technique should be reserved for single cat households since it will likely startle all the cats, not just the one you are trying to distract.

Having a new kitten can be a very rewarding experience. Just remember that kittens need education and guidance just as children do. They are not born knowing which behaviors are acceptable to you and which ones are not. If you are having difficulty correcting a particular behavior problem, please speak to your veterinarian for assistance early before the problem becomes more severe.