

## SOCIAL BEHAVIOR AND FEAR PREVENTION IN KITTENS

### ***What is socialization?***

Socialization is the process during which the kitten develops relationships with other living beings in its environment.

### ***Why are these terms important?***

Cats that receive insufficient exposure and contact with people, other animals and new environments during their first two months may develop irreversible fears, leading to timidity or aggression. Expose your kitten to as many stimuli (people, places and things), when they can most effectively socialize, localize, and habituate to these stimuli. The first 1 to 3 months of life are the most critical periods in the social development of the cat.



### ***Are cats a social species?***

While they are fairly independent and can do well on their own, cats are quite social. Although feline social behavior has not been as extensively studied as for the dog, the domestic cat is much more social than has been traditionally reported.

### ***Do cats have “personalities”?***

Research has shown that it may be possible to classify cat "personalities" similar to what has been done for dogs. Timid cats can take significantly longer to approach people. Some cats can be shy and other very trusting. Research has shown that trusting cats were trusting regardless of where they encountered people, while shy cats were more fearful the further from home they were encountered.

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

**Early handling:** Kittens that are stimulated and handled from birth are more confident, more social, more exploratory, faster to mature and are better able to handle stress as they develop. Early handling of kittens decreases their approach time to strangers and increases the amount of time that they stayed with them. The more handling the better; but even 15 minutes a day will help to improve later behavior. Regular and frequent handling from birth increases the likelihood that the kitten will relate well to people when placed into a home after weaning at 6 to 9 weeks of age.

**Socialization:** The two most important factors in how social a cat becomes with people are its genetic personality, and the amount of socialization it receives during the sensitive period of socialization which is thought to be 3 - 7 weeks of age. Certainly, the greater exposure a kitten has to humans of all ages, other pets and novel situations, the better adjustment that kitten will have.

### ***How can I assist my new kitten's socialization?***

Introduce your kitten to many new people and situations as possible. If the kitten is meeting a person or other pet for the first time and remains playful and inquisitive be certain to encourage and reinforce the kitten for its actions, and repeat the exposure regularly with a variety of similar stimuli. If however the kitten is fearful or withdrawn, a more gradual introduction while pairing favored treats and play with each exposure may improve the relationship fairly quickly. Be certain that the stimulus moves slowly so as not to startle the kitten. Strangers may be able to offer treats or stimulate play using a favored chase toy. However, when introducing a kitten to other animals, the stimulus should be well restrained and calm so that the kitten's fear is not enhanced, and it can be motivated to take the treats and food for the owner.

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

Your interaction with your new kitten begins on the ride home. Cats should ***ALWAYS*** be transported in some kind of carrier in the car. By teaching your kitten to ride in a confined location you are providing safety for your cat in future car rides. Upon arriving at home, place the kitten in a small, quiet area with food and a litter box. If the kitten is very tiny, a small litter box with lowered sides may be necessary at first. If possible, duplicate the type of litter material used in the previous home.

The first place you put your new kitten should be inspected for nooks and crannies where a kitten might hide or get stuck. Often in a new environment, a kitten may look for a secluded place to hide. However, all kittens and cats will need to investigate their new surroundings. After your new kitten has had some quiet time in a restricted location, slowly allow access to other areas of the home.

Kittens are natural explorers and will use their claws to climb up onto anything possible. In the first few weeks, slow access to the home will allow exploration as well as giving you the ability to monitor the kitten's behavior. Monitor for any stimuli, rooms or areas that seem to frighten the cat, and use favored treats and play to encourage further exposure.