

Cat Behavior Library

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 a minimum of 5 seconds per day.

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 - 9 weeks of age, this willingness to accept others decreases.

NEVER respond to aggression with physical aggression or corrections. That only increases aggressive pet behaviors.

If kittens are not regularly handled by humans before 12 weeks of age, they will be less likely to approach people or seek human affection. They may be considered "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.

If kittens are not socialized to people and other cats or dogs before 9 weeks of age, they may be labeled "asocial." In the wild, a colony of cats chase off outsiders. However, over time an "outsider" that continues to hang around long enough, may be accepted into the colony

If kittens are not regularly handled by humans before 12 weeks of age, they may be forever "skittish" around new people.

The idea behind gentling is to take full advantage of this socialization period in order to prepare the cat for a life in a human world, instead of the wild.

Beginning at 3 weeks of age, try to arrange for the cat to have gentle positive experiences with other cats, dogs, children and as many people as possible.

CAUTION: If any of these experiences cause fear, pain or frustration it may result in a negative association instead of positive.

Suspension

In kittens less than 12 weeks of age, it may be beneficial to pick them up by the scruff of the neck in situations where they are not frightened or tense. Since this is how their mom picks them up, there is a reflex to become calm when suspended. One reason to do this is to calm a kitten who is playing too rough, or is too hyperactive. Another context is to pick up the kitten when it is calm for the purpose of cuddling.



Gentling

The goal of **gentling** is to teach the kitten to accept human hands as sources of food and petting, and not as objects for play fights or punishment. Gentling is best done daily in kittens in the first year of life but particularly when less than 12 weeks of age. Take care to move the skin around in a massage fashion which is different from "petting" that smoothes out the fur. Try to touch every square inch of the kitten, including moving the ear flaps, lips and tail. Be very gentle and loving during this exercise and reward cooperation with treats and praise, because you are building a bond intended to last a lifetime.

If the kitten begins to play with your hands, stop and ignore the kitten, or begin to play a different game that is "object" or toy oriented so that kitten play does not involve play-biting or play-scratching your hands.

Play biting can lead to aggression toward people later in life. Instead play games like chase the string, or fake bird where the kitten can exercise and act out normal predatory play behaviors with inanimate objects.

Range Of Motion Exercises

The term "range of motion" comes from human physical therapy and means moving an extremity through its full range as long as it doesn't cause pain. The goal with young kittens is to establish that humans have the "right" to do this. Later in life, it

might become necessary to clean a wound, or remove a foreign object. A well-mannered cat is typically well-socialized to people and handling and so accepts humans moving its body as needed.

Restraint

Closely related to the range of motion exercise is the concept of restraint. Begin to hold the kitten still for a few seconds from day one through the sensitive, socialization period. Since the kitten is learning "how the world works" during this time, any experience such as gentling, minor restraint, bathing, etc., will often be accepted as "just the way life is" with humans, especially if started with the kitten is already relaxed and sleepy.

Begin with short hugs, and gradually extend the hug. Go very slowly to avoid any fear or panic response on the part of the kitten. If the kitten begins to panic, immediately put it down and ignore it. You can expect a small struggle before the kitten relaxes and puts their trust in your hands. The older the kitten, the longer the struggle - initially. The reason to ignore the kitten for not cooperating is to show no threat and to allow its natural desire to be near you to increase. Eventually, the goal is to raise a kitten that relaxes like a rag-doll and allows gentle handling in any position. This indicates high trust and bonding with people.

Ideally, the veterinarian will be able to complete a very thorough exam or x-rays on this cat later in life; and the cat will not be terrified or stressed by this type of handling.

How to Respond To Kitten Biting

All kittens bite each other and everyone else as part of natural kitten play. It is nature's way for the kitten to learn when and who to bite seriously later in life. Do NOT encourage the kitten to bite or scratch human hands, even in play. If the kitten learns to do this early in life, the chances are greater that it will grow up to be aggressive toward people. When the kitten begins to play with your hands, don't play, and either ignore the kitten, or encourage playing with inanimate objects.

If the kitten keeps coming and you don't want to move, try "spin the kitty". Without letting him bite you, try to turn the kitten in several circles like spinning a top. The goal is to distract the kitten and change the subject. Sometimes the same goal can be achieved by elevating the kitten for a few seconds by its scruff.

When the kitten begins to play with your hands, stop play and either ignore the kitten or encourage playing with inanimate objects.

Avoid Any Punishment Of Kitten Aggressive Play

Rather than punish the kitten for biting or scratching, maintain the bond by redirecting the play. Plan to spend more time when the kitten is sleepy doing gentling exercises such as gentling, range of motion and minor restraint.