

KITTEN SOCIALIZATION



Technically, the term *socialization* refers to getting a young animal accustomed to people and other animals in its social environment. The *socialization period* is the time in the animal's life when its brain is at its most plastic and adaptable and is naturally developing attachments to humans. For lack of a better term, socialization has also become the word we use when talking about introducing young animals to all sorts of new experiences.



In dogs, the socialization period occurs between 8 and 12 weeks of age. This is perfect timing because it corresponds with the time that most puppies are adopted by their new families. In kittens, however, it starts and ends much earlier, from 3 to 7 weeks of age. When you adopt a kitten at 7 or 8 weeks of age, the socialization period is ending already and you are depending on those who raised her to have introduced her

to people or dogs. Kittens who do not have exposure to people during this 3-7 week window will never bond fully with people. The more handling a kitten gets and the more people it meets at this early stage, the more social and outgoing he or she will be as an adult cat.

Ideally, a young kitten is handled at least 10-15 minutes a day during the socialization period, and it spends time with dogs and other animals. Kittens learn faster if their mother teaches them how to respond to new things. Kittens raised by a feral (wild, untamed) mother will not be as friendly as if their mother is tame, even if they have the same amount of handling. Backyard or barn kittens who don't receive much handling are often difficult to work with later. By *handling*, we mean more than just petting but also being picked up, carried and played with.

From 8 to 12 weeks of age, kittens are still learning how to play or hunt and they are developing adult responses to threats. In other words, they are learning what they should be afraid of and what not to be concerned about. It is very important to

Caring People Helping Pets



2082 Cheyenne Court, Grafton, WI 53024 • phone: 262-375-0130 • fax: 262-375-4196 • www.bestfriendsvet.com



introduce them to new experiences so those things will not be perceived as threats later on. This includes:

- Leashes and harnesses
- Having feet touched and toes manipulated, nail trimming, foot massages
- Having ears handled and cleaned
- Brushing and grooming, gently with a soft brush
- Holding still on a table or countertop
- Having things done as if being examined – lifting the tail up, looking in the ears and mouth, body massage

Choose a quiet time when your kitten is sleepy to do all these things. If your kitten is in play mode, biting and pouncing at everything, wear her out playing first.

Daily playtime with your kitten is important for bonding with you. Don't use your hands, fingers or feet as lures or toys, however. See our handouts on scratching behavior and choosing safe toys and treats for more information.

Every kitten should have a crate or carrier. The carrier should be out and visible all the time and it should have a soft bed inside plus food, treats or toys to entice the kitten inside. Cat nip can also be used inside the crate. Every day the door of the crate should be closed and the kitten should be carried around inside of it, first in the house and then in and out of the car, with short car rides that usually end back home. If going for a car ride is an every-day non-threatening event as a kitten, it will remain so the rest of its life.

When you have a busy household, especially with young children, kittens or newly adopted cats should have a quiet room to retreat to for naps. Don't disturb a kitten when it's sleeping unless you have to, and teach your children to respect that as well. This is a place to feel safe and secure. It should have a litter box, toys and food and water bowls.



Continue introducing your kitten to new people, to reinforce the handling he or she received earlier on. The more people who pet and play with her the better.

Never punish a kitten, as this creates fear and avoidance of humans when we want the opposite to happen. Call us if you are struggling with a behavioral problem and don't know how to change it.

In summary, spend a little time working with your new friend every day and you will gain a lifetime with a more tolerant and sociable cat!