

Working with an Under-Socialized Kitten

Some of the kittens that we get were born outside and have had minimal contact with humans. It is especially important for these kittens to receive lots of handling while they are still young so that they can be friendly, well-adjusted family pets. It is a lot of work the first week and extra care and attention needs to be given for these kittens to have any hope of becoming a well-adjusted pet feline. You must always be positive with your approach and fearless when handling them.

Under socialized kittens often hiss, sometimes spit and stomp, and sometimes swat and bite. The way to correct these behaviors is to be gentle yet firm, and totally unafraid of the kitten even when she looks ferocious. You must remain calm and able to hold the kitten without reacting fearfully or in anger. You must remain calm and relaxed. Approach the young cat sideways, gaze averted using soft blinking eyes and soft tones. Keep up your soft firm approach. Offer food and the back of your hand to sniff. Direct staring is considered rude by cats so avert your gaze and then look back, soft and blinking eyes signals to the cat you mean no harm.

Keep the kitten in a small confined space they cannot hide in and can easily be caught. A cat carrier is ideal for the first few days. Wear thick gloves or use a small thick towel as a glove if you're worried the kitten might strike out. It is better to approach the kitten fearlessly with gloves than fearfully with bare hands! A good way to hold a kitten you're working with is by the scruff of the neck. Use a soft towel to wrap them in. Talk to the kitten, and pet it gently with your free hand. Have the environment be calm and free of distractions just for the first day as the kitten learns to trust and bond with you. Repeat this exercise as often as you can, but ideally 15 times a day for 5-10 minutes each time for the first day or two. This has to be an intensive kitty boot camp, a crash course on how to trust the human that pets and feeds you. (Some people combine this with watching TV, reading, or other activities.) Feliway, a cat appeasing hormone, sprayed onto a soft towel and gently stroking the kitten with the towel is also very effective. You can also spray it on your hands and let the cat sniff. They will usually be interested and will sometimes offer a head butt.

In conjunction with the "holding exercise" you should also be hand feeding your kitten. . They should associate you with the food! Use high value wet cat food on a spoon and tasty treats to tempt them.

Also, try play therapy if the kitten is over 4 weeks old. Get a cat-dancer or other interactive toy, and engage the kitten's interest (These toys should not be left with the kitten unsupervised.) If you would like to use a clicker for training the kitten we can show you how.

The socialization process can take a day or two with really young kittens, but up to a week or more with older ones. As the kitten gets less frightened, which it's sure to do, you can start holding her/him with your bare hands, and releasing your hold more and more. You can also expand their space to a small room. Allowing them opportunity to play with the other kittens in the litter is good, as long as they do not regress during or after (hissing more, etc.) Introducing them to other people is an important step of the socialization process. Friends and family should be "trained" in how to handle the kittens.

Key Points

- Give the kitten a day to settle in a quiet environment such as a bathroom but then start exposing the young cat to novel and different stimulus every day. **DO NOT** leave them in a closet or bathroom and ignore them. They will not recover and the first few weeks of a kitten's life are the only window of opportunity they will have to experience the world and become adoptable.

- Set the kittens' crate up off floor so they feel more comfortable. Felines feel safer if they are higher and not at ground level. Carry their crate wherever you go and place it on the counter or where ever to get them used to household noise. Take them in the car; expose them to novel experiences such as water, baths, other friendly animals and people and kids. Use a toothbrush to comb them with, trim their nails, open their mouths, and look in their ears, all done gently and firmly and a lot of their favorite food as a reward.
- **Supervise children closely and do not allow handling until the kitten is relaxed.** It is a great idea to set them on a counter and watch kids and household activity. Cats love to observe and watch.
- Don't keep the kittens confined away from the household action. Leave a TV or radio on, so they become accustomed to human voices and sounds. If exposure to other pets is not an issue, set the whole crate in a busy living room with a TV playing.
- Kittens will respond to positive experiences. Reward positive behaviors and prevent negative experiences like scolding or confrontations with other pets. Use food and toys to enchant and engage them.
- Gauge each kitten's ability to learn and become accustomed to you. Evaluate each on their individual characteristics and merits.
- Spitting, hissing and hiding are all expressions of fear; be patient and do not mistake these signs for aggression.

Socializing with food – Food is the key to socialization. Providing the kitten with food creates an incentive for the kitten to interact with you and forms a positive association, ensuring that she connects you with the food she loves so much.

- You may keep dry kitten food out all day. When you feed wet food, stay in the room while the kittens eat it, so they associate you with food and begin to trust you. Only have very tasty food and treats down in your presence.
- If the kittens are very timid, try to first give them food on a spoon through the cage.
- Over time, gradually move the food plate closer to your body while you sit in the room, until the plate is in your lap and the kittens are comfortable crawling all over you on you to get to it.
- Pet and handle the kittens for the first time while they are eating, so they have an incentive to stay put. Start petting around the face, chin, and behind the ears and work up to petting all over.
- Don't offer food to kittens on your finger or allow kittens to play with your hand or bite or scratch you. A bite from even a young kitten can be painful and dangerous and it teaches the kittens that biting is acceptable behavior. Use toys such as Kitty Kong Kickaroo or other soft toy to interact and play with the kitten. They learn to bite toys and not your hands.

Socializing with Touch and Play – All young kittens should be picked up often to be petted, brushed, and played with so they are used to this behavior when they grow up. Short interactive sessions about five times per day is good after the initial intensive bonding experience has been effective and you now have a kitten that actively solicits your attention.

- If you haven't separated the kittens, take time to socialize each of them individually. Handling them away from the group can speed up the socialization process by making them more dependent on you.
- Devote about two hours per day for successful socialization. You can do a few long sessions or several shorter sessions.
- Get down to the kittens' level and play with them, find out what they like. Are they rough and tumble or sweet and soft or an unpredictable combo of both? Keeping a notebook will show your progress and be helpful to the shelter in understanding the kitten as it comes in for adoption.



- **Hold the kittens as much as possible.** Make sure they are close to your body so they feel your body warmth and heartbeat. This is especially productive after they have eaten, so they associate you with the food and the cuddles. Carry them everywhere.
- If a kitten is particularly feisty, put her in a front carrying pack or papoose her in a towel with only the head out and hold her while doing things around the house.
- After kittens are comfortable enough with you to fall asleep on your lap or purr in your presence, they can move from the initial confinement space to a larger, kitten-proof room.

Introduce New Friends – Your goal is to socialize the kittens so that they are comfortable around all people and pets and will be happy in their new homes, so introduce them to new some faces!

- As long as all are healthy, you can introduce kittens to an adult socialized cat. A neutered tom may play with and groom the kittens, which helps the socialization process.
- Introduce kittens to as many people as you can to adjust them to strangers and unexpected circumstances.
- If there are other friendly animals in your household, exposing them will only help their socialization.

Keeping Kittens Safe

- Do not use toxic cleaning products or leave them in the room with kittens, including Lysol®, Clorox®, and wet wipes.
- If kittens are in your bathroom, pull the shower curtain up and out of the way, so they don't climb it.
- Take ALL knick-knacks out of the room (i.e., perfume bottles, soap bottles, jewelry, figurines, etc.)

- **Do not allow very young children to play with or help socialize the kittens. They are not old enough to understand and react to the temperament and behavior of feral kittens.**
- Don't keep kittens in a room with a "La-Z-Boy®" (reclining) chair. The kittens can be injured or killed if they go inside the chair and accidentally get closed underneath.

What you will need (beyond the usual. ☺)

- Gloves and soft towels
- Tasty high value treats, wet cat food.
- Bedding materials and portable crate.
- Dens or other safe nesting items.
- Nylon front pack - hands free vest carrier for socializing, This alone works wonders to carry the kitten everywhere you go!
- Interactive toys, such as balls, rope toys, and crinkle toys, tooth brush, kitty kick a roo, Feliway Spray, cat nip toys work well too. Cats love empty boxes as well. Make a kitty fort to play and pounce in.
- Radio (tuned to talk radio) and CD with common household noise (TV, dishwasher, vacuum cleaner, etc.)

-Julie Hughes Behavior Specialist