

No More Scaredy-Cat (Guidelines For Optimal Kitten Socialization And Development)

Whether you have taken in a pregnant stray or carefully bred your champion Abyssinian, there is much to do to assure that the resulting kittens will grow up to be stable little charmers. A cat's personality is largely formulated in the first eight weeks of life. Leaving health issues to the veterinarian, here's what you can do to help your kittens be all that they can be behaviorally.

Your first important task is to provide proper nutrition for your pregnant queen. Since your female feline will lose weight while nursing, allow her to bulk up before giving birth. Many savvy cat owners switch their expecting cats back to kitten chow to get those extra calories per mouthful. Studies have shown that a malnourished queen is more irritable with her kittens and provides less mothering. Consequently, her kittens will be developmentally delayed, slower to open their eyes, walk and engage in play. As they mature, such kittens show poorer learning ability, greater levels of fear and aggression and more anti-social behavior toward other cats.

No Place like Home

When setting up a cat nursery, avoid the empty room/sterile box set-up, especially for kittens two- to eight-weeks of age. Kittens kept in a more complex environment for their first two months are less nervous later in life than those kept in un-stimulating surroundings.

Provide plenty of sensory stimulation. A radio or television can be left on in the room some of the time. Flooring can consist of newspapers, old towels, a carpet square, linoleum tile, perhaps even a piece of Astroturf™. A small cardboard box for the kittens to crawl on with a hole cut in the side can serve as a den once the kittens are mobile. Don't use fresh produce boxes, though, for they may have been sprayed with harsh pesticides.

Engage in gentle handling as soon as possible. Early human handling results in precocious development. When the kittens are two- to three-weeks of age, increase the sphere of handlers to include three or four people daily to help the kittens learn to trust all humans. However, keep adult male cats out of the nursery, as the queen will perceive them as predators and will be stressed unduly.

A Family Affair

Since kittens learn by watching how an adult cat operates, it is important to keep the litter with the mother until at least eight weeks of age, which coincides nicely with the end of weaning for most kittens. Through observational learning they get the hang of using the litter box and whether or not to cover waste, how to hunt and kill (although this behavior is partially predetermined genetically), what foods are safe to eat and who is appropriate as a friend. Kittens also learn to cope with stress and frustration, since Mom Cat controls the "milk bar" and they don't always get the opportunity to feed until satiated.

Lastly, it is important to keep littermates together until eight- to ten-weeks of age. Through their interactive play, kittens learn to control their clawing and biting, and to extend their acceptance of littermates to felines outside of the family.

One last note: Hand-raised single orphans or those separated from their mother before eight weeks often prove to be hyperactive kittens who cannot handle frustration. As adults, they have a tendency to be fearful and aggressive toward people and other cats. They learn less well and have a predilection toward an asthma-like respiratory condition. Often orphans can be spared this fate by adding them to another litter or at least fostering them in a home with other cats to serve as role models.

These guidelines for optimal socialization and development could just make generalizations such as "aloof," "anti-social" and "scaredy-cat" no longer applicable to America's most popular pet.

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