

Socializing Kittens

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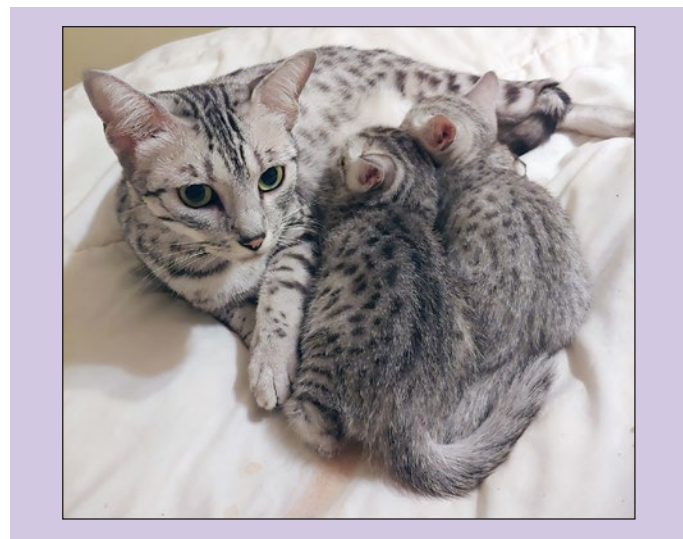
One of the pleasures of breeding pedigreed cats is receiving happy texts, emails, and photos from their new families raving about their kitties. In a world where the majority of cats are randomly bred, socialization can take a back seat to survival when kittens are placed by rescues at earlier-than-ideal ages to make room to save more. As a result, acquiring a pedigreed cat who has been properly socialized is a new experience for many cat owners. Teaching our kittens how to be good feline citizens is one of the most important things we do to ensure their future happiness and that of their new families.

What qualifies a cat as a good feline citizen? Humans expect cats to use the litter pan, use a scratching post rather than furniture, accept claw clipping, and allow appropriate grooming. Cats should allow themselves to be picked up and carried, go into and travel in a carrier, and refrain from using claws and teeth when playing with their friends, both human and animal. They should also be used to routine activities and noises they are likely to encounter in a home or even at a show. Much of the socialization process involves figuring out what will be new and different to a kitten and exposing it to these things in as nonthreatening a way as possible.

Start With Good Parents

Maine Coon breeder Teresa Sweeney recommends the earliest possible start for socializing—when planning the breeding! “I think it is always important to know the temperaments of the parents. It is so important because I believe there is a genetic component.” She believes that as good stewards for our breeds, we need to have that awareness and breed only cats that are even tempered.

The parents contributes to temperament of the kittens by genetics and sometimes behavior. The mother models behavior towards humans. Dr. Sarah Brown states, “the temperament of the father has a distinct effect on the subsequent behavior of his kittens, with friendlier fathers producing friendlier kittens...”¹ That said, particularly in minority breeds, at times breeding a cat of questionable temperament may be the right choice for genetic diversity and to avoid specific genetic conditions. Early handling is a key. The period from two to seven weeks is the sensitive period when kittens should be handled 15 minutes or more per day. Exposure to different people helps kittens determine what a safe human is.



Rhonda Burke's overworked Devon Rex queen

Let Mom Do Her Job

Some good behavior tends to come naturally. Staying with mom and siblings for 12 to 16 weeks provides a basis for learning proper cat-to-cat interaction. One important thing babies learn from mom and littermates is to avoid using claws and teeth when playfighting. They will cry out and chastise the kitten who bites. Most kittens learn to groom, use the litter pan, and use scratching posts with little coaxing if mom models those good behaviors.

Humans can encourage kittens in this learning by providing clean, accessible litter pans, with a variety of litters so they will accept what they find in their new homes. Since we can't guarantee that the new family will follow our feeding plan, exposing kittens to assorted foods early on may prevent them from being picky eaters. Providing a variety of “legal” scratching surfaces is important. Sisal and cardboard are preferable to fabric, as how will kittens know that it is okay to claw carpet and fabric on a cat tree but not on the floor or furniture?

Handle Kittens Frequently and Gently

Frequent gentle handling of kittens from the first day seems a universal recommendation. Make yourself a positive part of their lives every day, and be consistent. Start by picking them up and speaking gently to them and, as time passes and they become more confident, work through holding them on their backs and going through show positions. Even if the kitten never goes to a show, s/he will be more confident from learning that no harm comes from human handling.

Laurie Coughlan's Egyptian Mau queen Makani

Routines Help Build Trust

Cats are big believers in rituals and routines. Remember how your cats respond when daylight savings time comes or goes and you adjust feeding time? Cats are offended by such changes in routine, and they probably vocalized their discontent. Our best results come from using their natural inclinations. One valuable lesson is teaching them to come when called, using a specific call and tone and providing rewards of food and cuddles. Food is a powerful motivation with most cats, and this lesson is unlikely to be forgotten, even if it is not always followed.

Anticipate Their Concerns

Simple things may give kittens pause. At first shows, more than one of the author's Egyptian Mau kittens seemed to wonder why the fluffed-up Persians they saw were angry. If they are from a breed of all one color and coat length, kittens may not at first recognize cats of other breeds as normal cats. Teresa Keiger notes "Most Russian Blues grow up seeing ONLY other blue cats (and the occasional blue point). When they finally get to their first show, seeing other shapes and colors/patterns of cats must be overwhelming, especially if they are long-hairs! I noticed a huge change in temperament when I went into the judging program and had different breeds in my house. But exposing kittens to different styles of cats can help." Remember how many things a kitten sees for the first time that may not make sense to them. Give them a chance

to explore things like other animals, small noisy humans, mirrors and faucets in their own time.

Expose Them to Sounds

Kittens need to be exposed to a variety of sounds. "My biggest challenge is having a quiet household with just my husband and myself," wrote Teresa Keiger. "I invite friends over to play with them and enable them to interact with strangers." Lyn Knight, currently working with Himalayan Persians and American Shorthairs, seconded that thought. "We are an adult-only home, so we keep the TV or radio on during the day for them. They are exposed to other noises, from a small, hand-held vacuum to large vacuum noises and my clumsy occasional dropping of things by mistake. The household noises of washing machine, dryer, vacuum, etc., are important from an early age to establish trust that strange noises won't kill you." Consider getting a tape of public address system announcements if you plan on taking them to shows. It also helps to show them fans, including ceiling fans, and accustom them to the sound of a fan.

Use Cat Logic and Habituation

Cats have opinions, and very strong ones at times. You don't win an argument with a cat, especially a scared one. Generally, the harder you try to hold them, the harder they will try to get away, so learn to pause during new activities and relax for a moment. If



An Egyptian Mau kitten Jubilee exploring the vet's office

you force a kitten to do something, s/he will be wary of it, and perhaps of you, in the future. Coax and cajole and tempt with toys and treats until you achieve the desired result. Many of us know of cats that, after one scary travel experience, developed the ability to predict the next trip to the vet or the show and became amazingly elusive, if not invisible.

Teresa Keiger believes "a big portion of socializing a kitten is your own attitude. Give off positive vibes. If you're doing something 'to' them (clipping nails, examinations, for example), just relax and talk to them. Adopt a 'and here's what we're going to do now and it's no big deal' attitude, and they will definitely pick up on that. Don't give them a reason to be fearful."

Much of what we want them to know just takes some habituation. Regularly leaving a carrier out and open with a bed in it and an occasional treat may make the difference between a cat seeing it as a playhouse versus a chamber of horrors. Some take treats to the vet's office so that the vets and vet techs can use them to make the experience less scary. Many breeders make a point of taking kittens for car rides and even into pet-friendly stores. One drives them through the car wash, safely ensconced in their carriers. Feeding kittens in a show cage set up at home makes that a safe space if they later use one at a show.



Kaisa Savolainen's daughter and her Russian Blue kitten are quickly growing up together!



Two litters of Russian Blue kittens - photographed only because they had just woken up.

Teach Them Grooming

Cats in general are self-cleaning, but every cat needs some care, starting with claw clipping. Show cats also need to accept ear cleaning and face wiping, and of course, baths.

Many breeders start kitten grooming with gentle combing to mimic grooming cats give each other, starting and ending with a favorite spot to imprint that it's a pleasurable event. They may move on to partial baths, getting the kitten used to the sink by running water and moving the hose around before the actual bath. That first bath may involve just getting the kitten partly wet, applying water from the neck back, progressing to ones using gentle, nontoxic baby shampoo, which is easier to rinse completely. Leave time for the kitten to observe and decide the process is not fatal, unpleasant thought it may be, in a cat's opinion.

Cats with long coats may require significant daily care, starting early in life. Susan Cook Henry's conditioning for Persian kittens starts as early as one week with claw clipping and holding them in a variety of positions to be sure they are comfortable being on their backs for future grooming. "The most important thing in bringing up Persian babies is the care and maintenance of faces (especially eyes) and their coats. We began the face washing with warm, damp cotton rounds at about three weeks. The first baths began around four weeks and are continued weekly. Daily maintenance is key in making sure that Persian kittens are used to various grooming tools and methods, and are attuned to the sound and feel of running water and being regularly doused! The hair dryer and being in front of a strong rush of warm air goes hand in hand with the bathing process, and beginning all of this at an early age will help ensure a kitten will be ready to go to its new home with well-educated owners."

Avoid Teaching the Wrong Stuff

Consider also what things you do not want your kittens to learn. I strongly recommend, for example, that you never get up and feed cats first thing in the morning, because that teaches them that waking you up means food for them. Put multiple activities between getting out of bed and feeding them, and they may not wake you. (If they already have that habit, you won't be able to break it.) Be vigilant about putting away food unless you want them to become counter cruisers. Teach them to respect doors by not responding to whining and pulling at closed doors, but try to teach this during the day rather than while you are trying to sleep! Discourage door darting by only showing them outside when the weather is unspeakably bad. If a look out the storm door never shows them anything but a blizzard or a thunderstorm, they will be fine with staying inside. Finally, use toys rather than hands for play, unless you want to teach kittens to bite at and grab your hands. You can't blame the cat if you taught it the wrong things.

The Good Feline Citizen

A properly socialized kitten is raised as a member of the family and is exposed to daily activities, sights, and sounds. Gentle handling from the beginning will incline kittens to trust humans. Let their mother teach them the basics, while you introduce new experiences in as nonthreatening a way as possible. Of course, cats will do what cats will do, and there is no guarantee that an individual will learn everything you try to teach. However, if you teach them through persuasion, patience, and positive reinforcement, you will likely produce good feline citizens who will delight their future families.

Special thanks to the many breeders who shared their kitten socialization tips for this article, in particular Teresa Keiger, Teresa Sweeney, Lyn Knight, and Susan Cook Henry.

Source

1. Brown, Sarah. *The Cat: A Natural and Cultural History*, 2020 by Quarto Publishing plc. Published by Princeton University Press.



Bengal kittens bred by Melody Boyd