



There are four key processes you can use to help your kitten learn these good practices: socialization, habituation, stimulation, and training. Consistency is the key

Socialization

Socialization is all about how to communicate. Kittens learn about themselves and how to interact with others through socialization. It teaches important social cues that they'll use throughout their adult lives.

When kittens socialize with cats and other species, they correct each other when playing too rough and encourage each other when playing too timidly. They learn how to treat humans and how to play with them, too. If kittens are not properly socialized, they may be easily scared or even aggressive later in life. It is crucial to socialize your cat, especially if you plan on having a multi-pet household.

There is a critical socialization period for kittens (until they reach 14 weeks of age), and during this time, they're primed to learn all the social skills they need to succeed. Remember that kittens are not fully vaccinated until 16 weeks old. This means they are susceptible to infectious diseases and illnesses during this important socialization period. Be sure to only socialize your kitten with other vaccinated pets, including cat-friendly dogs, and as many different people as possible.

Use toys, treats, and other high-value rewards like pets and scratches when your cat socializes with themselves, with other animals, and with you. You'll start to notice different noises and vocalizations – cats meow and use different sounds to express their needs and wants, and you'll learn these as your kitten grows.

Habituation

Habituation is how a kitten gets used to their surroundings and all the sights, sounds, smells, noises, and tastes that come with it. Expose your kitten to plenty of new people and experiences so they begin learning and ultimately become less fearful as an adult.

Just as when you socialize your cat, use positive rewards like toys and treats when you introduce your kitten to new things. A key part of the habituation process is handling your cat often. It will go a long way if they are comfortable being touched and handled by different people – from reducing stress at vet visits to giving medications easily and being accepting of strangers.

Start the process as soon as your kitten or new cat comes home. Rub their belly, play with their ears, touch their mouth and teeth, and hold them in different positions. Involve friends and family members to build your little one's trust, and always remember to give a treat or other high-value reward with new experiences.

Here's our Socialization and Habituation Checklist. Try to run your new cat or kitten through all of these and more!



- Being touched or pet by strangers
- Experiencing human visitors come and go
- Meeting young children (while supervised)
- Meeting healthy and vaccinated cats
- Meeting healthy and vaccinated cat-friendly dogs (discuss with your veterinarian first!)
- Hearing the washing machine, dryer, and vacuum
- Hearing the phone ring
- Hearing laughter and clapping
- Traveling in a car
- Seeing and hearing trucks, bikes, buses, or scooters

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Stimulation

To create positive behaviors, your kitten needs to be exercised, both physically and mentally. Getting sufficient physical stimulation and mental enrichment helps to enforce your cat's good habits, and they will be less prone to behavioral issues. When cats don't get enough exercise, they can turn to disruptive actions like hyperactivity at night, scratching at unwanted surfaces, or play aggression.

Cats that are indoor-only need plenty of enrichment to fulfill their needs. Try using puzzle feeders and toys that mimic hunting instincts, like the indoor hunting feeder by [Doc and Phoebe](#).

Other enrichment ideas include:

- Scratching posts
- Dangling toys
- A laser pointer
- Pre-predator toys
- Crumpled paper balls
- Cardboard boxes and tunnels
- High surfaces to perch on and climb
- A window to look out

Cats love using cardboard boxes and other hiding places to play in and feel safe. These are one of the easiest toys to find – just repurpose a shipping box!

Avoid materials like plastic, string, thread, and yarn as these can cause intestinal damage and sickness when eaten. Keep plastic bags out of reach and monitor the toys that your cat plays with and chews on. If your cat starts destroying a soft toy with strings or other hazardous materials, throw it out immediately.



The best way to stimulate your cat is using appropriate toys and enrichment methods with them. Throw some toys around for them or encourage them to use a scratching post. This allows your cat to socialize with you while getting physical and mental activity.

Training

Positive reinforcement is key to ingraining these essential processes in your cat. Behavioral problems like aggression arise in cats whose habituation, socialization, and stimulation is often neglected. Training with rewards and positivity will encourage all the good behaviors and ultimately discourage the negative ones.

Use rewards in all aspects of your kitten's life. Give plenty of treats and praise when they play nicely, when they meet new people or places, and when they use toys and enrichment. Remember, a reward does not have to be food based. Show your cat that pets, scratches, and verbal praise are other fun trade-offs to expect when they exhibit those positive behaviors.

Be consistent, patient, and kind. Tackle these four cornerstones and you will have an experienced, well behaved kitty on your hands! As always, you can reach out to our team and doctors at Small Door with any questions or concerns.