

Great Kittens Have Good Owners

Congratulations on adopting a new kitten! Your new family member can bring you many hours of companionship and entertainment but there are a few things you need to prepare yourself for when adopting a youngster. Your main focus with a kitten is the prevention of unwanted habits. By doing so you will have a great kitten and someday soon, a great cat! Use the following guidelines to help you achieve great kitten status.

CONFINEMENT/PLAYPEN

Just like a human toddler, a kitten toddler (20 weeks and under) should always be supervised when left out to explore the household. If left alone with full access to your house without supervision, your kitten may develop unwanted toilet habits; bad scratching habits, destructive habits or be injured while exploring.

When you can't watch your kitten, confine him to a small bedroom, bathroom, or large dog crate within your house. His "room" or "playpen" should always contain a clean litter box, bedding, water, food, toys and a scratching post. That means confining him when you are sleeping, or have to go to work, or when you go to run errands. If your kitten enjoys sleeping in your lap while you watch TV or work at your computer, then that is a good time to bond with your kitten. But the minute you need to do something else and can't directly watch him, your kitten needs to go back into his room.

TOILET HABITS/LITTER BOX HABITS

To help your new kitten establish a lasting habit of using a litter box, it is helpful to follow some guidelines. Provide the litter box in a quiet, easily accessible location. At first, this should be in his room (see confinement). Be sure to clean the box daily, forever. The sandy scoopable litter is very helpful when cleaning often. If your kitten is very small he may have trouble climbing into a regular litter box, as the sides may be too tall. A litter box made out of a plastic box with the sides cut low for easy access may be necessary.

If your kitten has a toilet accident outside of his box and you find it AFTER he is finished, just clean the accident up with the enzyme cleaner (available at any pet store) and make sure you **confine** your kitten when you can not watch him. If your kitten is eliminating right in front of you in the wrong spot, just make a sudden loud noise (see the discipline section) to stop the kitten in the act. Then place him gently in his litter box and praise him verbally if he finishes in his box. Limit his freedom in the house for the next couple of weeks to just your lap or when you have a play session with him if he continues having accidents throughout the house. Do not rub his nose in it, swat him with a newspaper or shake him. Your kitten will learn nothing by using these methods except to fear you, and it may cause the problem to become worse.



PLAY/EXERCISE

Kittens need plenty of play periods per day. This helps them develop coordination and to establish good habits of playing with toys. At least twice a day, take out a Cat Aerobics or Cat Dancer or Feline Flyer or just some plain old string and get your kitten running, leaping, and pouncing to the point of exhaustion. Then put the toy away until the next "therapy" session. In addition to these play sessions, your kitten should also have several toys left out to play with during the day such as catnip mice or ping pong balls, dangling toys, cardboard boxes, or brown paper bags to hide in. Rotate toys into "play" every couple of days, to keep things stimulating.

Wrestling with your kitten using your hands is not advised as this teaches the kitten to use you as a play toy by biting and scratching at you! Your hands should only be used for petting and grooming your kitten, never as a play toy and never to discipline your kitten. If your kitten pounces on you instead of a toy, immediately make a loud noise (see the discipline section). And resolve to give the kitten more exercise to take the "pounce" out of him!

HANDLING/BRUSHING

Your new kitten should be handled (petted & brushed) a minimum of 15 minutes per day. If you are going to pet your kitten for longer periods it is often wise to divide the petting or brushing into several sessions per day. Several tasty food treats such as tuna, anchovy paste, lamb or chicken baby food given as you are touching and brushing your kitten will make it more pleasurable for him as well. Do not force your kitten to sit in your lap for long periods of time but let him explore your house **under supervision**. Practice calling your kitten and then rewarding him for coming to you with a food treat.

SOCIALIZATION

Your new kitten needs to be introduced in a positive way to as many different people as possible, including children. This process will teach your kitten to be social and not to fear strangers.

Give your visitors several tasty treats or the Cat Dancer toy to interact with your kitten. If your kitten hides when frightened by a new face let him do so. Instead of trying to drag him out and force him to interact with your guests, use that favorite toy or treat to lure him out.

KIDS & KATS

Children need to be closely supervised when with your kitten. Teach your children to pet gently and to hold the kitten only when sitting down. Kittens are fragile and cannot take rough handling so avoid fur, ear or whisker pulling! Most kittens like to be held only for short periods of time, so when Fluffy wants out of your child's lap make sure he can leave. Have your children train the kitten to come to them (using a food treat really speeds this up). Have your children interact with your new kitten by playing with a toy such as a Cat Dancer or Cat Aerobics toy. Your children can also feed the kitten special treats as they pet him so your kitten will learn to love children!

BITING/SCRATCHING

Kittens can often become overexcited during play even though you may not be trying to play with them at the moment! It is important the you provide the exercise periods mentioned earlier for your kitten, making sure the whole family understands to use toys, never hands, for play. If your kitten bites you, make sure you YELP like you have been fatally wounded and then stop all petting or playing with the kitten for a minimum of two minutes. If the kitten was sitting in your lap when he bit you, just stand up (do not pick the kitten up, just dump him out of your lap) and walk away.

Remember to make your lap a comfortable place by feeding food treats but do not make a trap out of your lap. If your kitten wants to leave your lap, let him. If your kitten bites or scratches when picked up, avoid picking your kitten up. Instead allow the kitten to approach you and reward the kitten with a small tasty treat. Pretty soon your kitten will figure out that you are pretty neat! He will enjoy your company and seek you out more often.

SCRATCHING FURNITURE

All cats need to use their claws for sharpening and for marking/scratching territory. **Expect that your new kitten will use your furniture to scratch unless you train the kitten to use a scratching post.**

First, get a sturdy scratching post made of carpet, rope, or wood or a combination of these. It is often worth the investment to buy several different posts to put in various locations throughout your house. Put one post in the kitten's confinement room and another in the living room. Hang a few toys from the posts, spray or rub them with catnip and play with your kitten around the posts. You can even reward your kitten with tasty treats when he uses the post.

Discourage your kitten from using your couch as a scratching post by supervising the kitten when he's loose in your house. If your kitten does try to scratch your furniture, discreetly create a sudden loud noise (see the discipline section) or secretly squirt the kitten with a spray bottle filled with water that is set on a straight stream. The main focus here should be teaching the kitten to play and scratch on his post rather than following him around with a squirt bottle.

DISCIPLINE

Any type of discipline for your kitten should be performed as discreetly as possible. If the kitten is up on counters or scratching your furniture or eating your plants, you want to make it appear that the act itself is creating a negative situation; not you, who happens to be there watching. An example would be that every time the kitten tried to scratch your couch, a loud bang (such as your hand slapping the wall or use an air horn) is heard. Physical punishment such as swatting, tapping, or shaking your kitten will result in your pet becoming afraid of you. This may in turn encourage the kitten to become aggressive. Therefore physical methods of discipline are not recommended. Try to use things that are remote and do not connect the punishment with you. A secret squirt from a spray bottle can often teach the kitten to stay away from things as well, but again you want the water to appear as magically as possible. Remember that whenever you cannot

watch your kitten, he needs to go into his safe room (see confinement) so he does not learn unwanted habits.

If you have any problems, questions or concerns please call the Humane Society Santa Clara Valley's Animal Behavior Helpline at (408) 727-3383, extension 753.

RECOMMENDED READING

Housecat - How to Keep Your Indoor Cat Sane and Sound

Christine Church, Howel Book House, 1998

Cat Behavior and Training

Compiled by: Lowell Ackerman, DVM,
T.F.H. Publications, Inc. 1996

Good Owners, Great Cats

Brian Kilcommons & Sarah Wilson,
Warner Books, 1995

From the Cat's Point of View

Gwen Bohnenkamp, Perfect Paws, Inc., 1991
order direct: 650-595-1962

101 Training Tips for Your Cat

Carin A. Smith, DVM,
Dell Trade Paperback, 1994

The Well-Behaved Cat: How to Change Your Cat's Bad Habits

Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine
Torstar Publications, 1999
order direct: 1-800-571-1555

Show Biz Tricks for Cats

Anne Gordon with Steve Duno
Adams Media Corporation, 1996