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SOCIALIZATION OF THE NEW CAT

What is socialization?

Socialization is the process during which the kitten develops relationships with other living beings in its environment.

What is habituation?

As cats develop, there are numerous stimuli (sounds, smells, sights and events) that when they are unfamiliar, can lead to fear and anxiety. Habituation is the process of getting used to and not reacting to those stimuli by continuous exposure under circumstances that have no untoward consequences.

Localization is the process during which the kitten develops attachment to particular places.

Why are these terms important?

Cats that receive insufficient exposure and contact with people, other animals and new environments during their first two months may develop irreversible fears, leading to timidity or aggression. Expose your kitten to as many stimuli (people, places and things), when they can most effectively socialize, localize, and habituate to these stimuli. The first 1 to 3 months of life are the most critical periods in the social development of the cat.

Are cats a social species?

Although they are fairly independent and can do well on their own, cats are quite social. Although feline social behavior has not been as extensively studied as for the dog, the domestic cat is much more social than has been traditionally reported. There are many situations where cats live together in groups and interact in a friendly manner. The composition of these groups differs from dog groupings. Usually they consist of female cats that are related. In large colonies, there may be many smaller related groups sharing the same space. Male cats will leave the group but return for breeding. Males that have been neutered join the group in much the same way as females. Colonies of feral (wild) cats will be found in areas where food is abundant and shared, such as barns, dumpsites or around fishing ports. The cats in the group will allogroom (lick each other) and allomark (rub on each other) one another. They will share the raising of kittens.

Do cats have "personalities"?

Research has shown that it may be possible to classify cat "personalities" similar to what has been done for dogs. One such study identified cats that were shy, timid or fearful and those that were confident. The timid cats took significantly longer to approach persons and be held by them. Another study identified cats that were "shy" and those that were "trusting". That research noted that trusting cats were trusting regardless of where they encountered people, while shy cats were more fearful the farther from home they were encountered. Based on these and other studies there are two common personality types: (a) sociable, confident and easygoing; (b) timid, shy and unfriendly. Some other research has also indicated an active aggressive type as well. What influences the development of personality type? Not surprisingly studies have confirmed that not only is personality inherited from the mother, but that friendliness specifically is, in part, inherited from the father.

How does the mother cat (or queen) teach her kittens?

Cats are very good at observational learning. This occurs when an animal watches a behavior being performed by another. The queen starts to teach her kittens at a young age. From the queen, kittens learn elimination behaviors and predatory behavior. Kittens will begin to spend time in the litter box at about 30 days of age and will learn appropriate litter usage through observation of the queen and certain olfactory (smell) cues. If allowed access to prey, the queen will begin to bring them to her offspring at about 32 - 36 days of age and teach them to hunt. The kittens will also begin to be weaned and eat solid food at the same age. The choice of food is also influenced by the queen. Play between kittens is also an important part of social development, particularly for those kittens that will be housed with other cats later in life.

What can I do to improve my chances of having a social, non-fearful cat?

a) Selection: The genetics of an individual cat plays a critical role in how sociable, playful, fearful, excitable, or domineering a kitten will become. The first issue in helping to ensure that a kitten will be friendly and social when it grows up is to choose an appropriate kitten for your family. Since cats have a variety of personality types, the question is whether these personality types can be determined at the time of selection.

In addition to genetics, early handling and the situations, people and other animals that your cat is exposed to during development (especially during the primary socialization period) are important factors that contribute to your cat's adult personality. Therefore, knowledge of the breed, assessment of the kitten's parents and evaluation of the kitten's environment and upbringing are important considerations when selecting a kitten. Some important questions to ask are: has there been adequate exposure to people, both adults and children? Has the kitten been handled frequently, preferably on a daily basis for at least 15 minutes? How does the kitten behave when picked up by prospective owners? Does it hiss, bite or scratch, or does the kitten purr and solicit affection? Does the kitten approach people or does it stand away? What has been the historical behavior of the queen and tom? Did they hunt and/or have access to prey? Do they have a good history of litter usage, and what type of litter material is used? What are the feeding habits and preferences of the parents? General observation of the temperament of both the kittens in the litter and the parents is helpful. Are they outgoing, shy or timid? Assessment of young kittens is likely of limited value if the kittens are still progressing through the primary socialization period, and the assessment of the parents may provide just as much information. Assessing older kittens and adult cats that have already passed through their primary socialization period will provide much more accurate information.

b) Early handling: Kittens that are stimulated and handled from birth are more confident, more social, more exploratory, mature faster and are better able to handle stress as they develop. Therefore, kittens obtained from a breeder or home where they have had frequent contact and interaction with the owners are likely to be more social and less fearful as they develop.

c) Socialization: Socialization of cats to people is variable. The two most important factors appear to be the cat's genetic personality, and the amount of socialization it receives during the sensitive period of socialization which is thought to be 3 - 7 or perhaps up to 9 weeks of age. Certainly, the greater exposure a kitten has to humans of all ages, other pets and novel situations, the better adjustment that kitten will have. Because the socialization period starts and ends earlier than the dog, the early environment is very important in determining future sociability. Regular and frequent handling throughout from birth also increases the likelihood that the kitten will relate well to people when placed in a home after weaning at 6 - 9 weeks of age. Early handling of kittens decreases their approach time to strangers and increases the amount of time that they stayed with them. The more handling the better but even limited handling for less than 15 minutes a day will affect later behavior.

How best should I introduce my new kitten to my home?

Your interaction with your new kitten begins on the ride home. Cats should always be transported in some kind of carrier in the car. By teaching your kitten to ride in a confined location you are providing safety for your cat in future car rides. Upon arriving at home, place the kitten in a small, quiet area with food and a litter box. If the kitten is very tiny, a small litter box with lowered sides may be necessary at first. If possible, duplicate the type of litter material used in the previous home.

The first place you put your new kitten should be inspected for nooks and crannies where a kitten might hide or get stuck. Often in a new environment, a kitten may look for a secluded place to hide. However, all kittens and cats will need to investigate their new surroundings. For a new kitten this is a more manageable task if you limit space available and initially supervise the kitten. When cats do investigate they use a random method of search. After your new kitten has had some quiet time in a restricted location, slowly allow access to other areas of the home.

Kittens are natural explorers and will use their claws to climb up onto anything possible. In the first few weeks slow access to the home will allow exploration as well as the ability to monitor the kitten's behavior.

Play and handling

New kittens need plenty of outlets for play. Stalking and pouncing behaviors are important play behaviors in kittens and aid in neural and muscular development. If given sufficient outlet for these behaviors with toys and perhaps a playmate, kittens will be less likely to use humans for these activities. Good toys are ones that move, are light enough to be picked up, but large enough so that they are not swallowed. Never use your hands or body parts for play. This can lead to dangerous play and human injury.

Depending on the personality and early experiences as a kitten, your cat may either enjoy, accept, or dislike, certain types of handling from petting to bathing. In order for the cat to learn to accept and enjoy a variety of types of physical contact from humans, it is critical that the human hand only be associated with positive experiences and that all physical punishment be avoided. Begin with those types of handling that the cat enjoys or is willing to accept, and provide small treats at each of the first few sessions. Once the cat learns to associate food with these sessions, slightly longer or intense sessions can be practiced. This type of handling can be used to help the cat become accustomed to, and perhaps enjoy, patting, grooming, teeth brushing, nail trimming, and even bathing. Never force this type of handling upon your cat as any negative experience will only make the problem worse and the cat more resistant to further handling.

It is important to remember that physical discipline is inappropriate. It can scare your cat and make him or her afraid of being picked up or held. If required, kittens should be discouraged from repeating inappropriate behaviors by the use of punishment devices such as remote control devices and booby traps.

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