

Keeping Cats & Kittens Fact Sheet

The kitten is here!

You have just adopted a kitten, and are looking forward to many years of shared tenderness, providing it with everything it needs. Perhaps you are already well aware, or perhaps you only somehow feel, that this little ball of fluff is replete with mystery - and you are quite right. Most of all, a cat is not a little dog! Our two most familiar pets may have the fact of being carnivorous in common, but their behaviours are very different from one another's. And if you want to make a cat happy, you need to respect its peculiarities.

A well-deserved reputation!

Rightly felt to be less demanding than dogs as far as training is concerned, cats enjoy the reputation of being clean and independent at the time of adoption. They seem to be the perfect pet: little bother, entirely able to cope with the many times when they have to stay alone, and giving love and affection while respecting the independence of their masters. But all that should not prevent the owners from getting involved in their new friend's up-bringing.

One of the first things to check is how far your kitten has got in terms of its socialisation. A very simple and useful test here is to (gently) take the kitten by the scruff of its neck and lift it up. A properly socialised kitten will respond to this kind of handling by curling up with its tail raised under its belly and a glassy look in its eyes. This is what is known as a 'positive carrying reflex', and such a reaction indicates that the kitten has stayed long enough in contact with its mother to be able to be properly socialised.

If, on the contrary, the kitten begins to howl when you lift it up in this way, with its claws out and the whole body arched in hyper-extension, then its level of socialisation is very low and it is going to be difficult to make a pleasant family pet of your kitten. If, after checking this reflex out several times, you still decide to keep the kitten, do not hesitate to speak about it with your Vet, who will be able to advise you as to how to increase your new friend's contact tolerance.

Attachment, socialisation, familiarisation

A cat's entire capacity for socialisation depends upon the quality of the attachment it has formed with its mother, and on the degree of socialisation of the mother herself.

A cat develops much faster than a dog: where a dog takes about six months to become autonomous, the key period for a kitten to grow up into a well-balanced cat lies in the sixth week of life. Of course, all is not lost, and it is still possible to enhance socialisation at the usual age of adoption: i.e., around two months. But it needs to be borne in mind that cats are not always necessarily social creatures, and that certain cats which have gone back to their wild state are capable of spending their whole life without any social interaction at all outside of mating seasons.

In the life of a cat, the first period of attachment is primordial, and this capacity for attachment, which is a juvenile characteristic, needs to be preserved. If this first attachment is of a quality such as to allow your cat to feel confident with all the humans and often the other species of animal (such as dogs) which it may encounter, then it will be relaxed and glad to be with you. Otherwise, it will become familiar with just one or with just a few persons, and hide away whenever a stranger appears; it will always be chary of the unknown, although your presence can reassure it. This is the distinction between a social and a merely familiar cat.

If such a lack of socialisation is making your cat aggressive, do not hesitate to consult your Vet. It is possible to detect disturbances in the process of detachment by means of the carrying reflex referred to above. One also often finds cats which go on trying to breast-feed, using pieces of cloth or, more commonly, their owner for this. From time to time, the animal forcibly seeks contact, settling on or against its master and taking a finger or some hair in its mouth to suck on for a fairly long time. In itself, this behaviour has nothing necessarily pathological about it, but you should talk to your Vet about it if it is associated with other signs (such as fearfulness, growling or spitting on contact, or on the other hand too quiet a cat...).

Training

During the period of development, the mother cat teaches her kittens certain 'self-control mechanisms': i.e., how to regulate and co-ordinate their movements and the action of their teeth and claws.

A well brought-up kitten will always be careful with others' faces, for example during games in which it is liable to scratch. If your kitten has not yet acquired this ability, you will need to teach it, and for this of course you will have to make use of behaviour patterns which it is familiar with. The techniques classically recommended as far as dogs are concerned- picking it up by the scruff of the neck, or pinning it to the ground- do not work with cats.

If we observe a mother cat with her litter, we can see two means of correcting a kitten, and we can copy them with a little adaptation. Firstly, she paws the muzzle, claws retracted, when the kitten loses control. You can copy this by giving a fairly sharp tap on the muzzle with your finger to stop any unwanted behaviour, with no risk of hurting the kitten.

If the kitten is really turbulent, the mother sometimes grips it between her fore-paws and pounds its belly with her rear paws. Here again, if you lay the kitten down on its side and hold it there with one hand and scratch its belly with the other, you should succeed in inhibiting any movement.

It is important to understand that these two techniques are meant to teach self-control to the little cat and are not intended to achieve submission: in fact, the idea of submission and dominance does not apply in the everyday life of a cat.

If you suspect that a reaction is due to a vaccination you should consult your vet. Your vet may in turn report it to the Veterinary Medicines Directorate who gather information on possible side effects of veterinary products.

Territory organisation

While cats may not always be social animals, they most certainly are always territorial. For your cat to be emotionally well-balanced, harmonious territorial structure is essential, and the feline approach to organisation is most particular and a far cry from human or even dogs' ideas on the subject. Cats divide their territory up into a certain number of areas, each with its own specific function.

The isolation field is an area which the cat does not wish to share, unless it be with extremely familiar individuals, and then only when it so chooses. It is often a raised position, where the cat can feel perfectly safe. Activity fields may, on the other hand, be shared and are devoted to some particular occupation (bird-watching, hunting, playing or feeding, etc.).

These various fields are all inter-linked by pathways which are always the same, and which the cat traces with pheromonal markers whenever it takes them. When you see a cat rubbing up against a piece of furniture, it is placing its familiarity markers there which will act as reassuring landmarks for it afterwards. This very strict and most particular organisation is necessary if a cat is to be emotionally well-balanced.

There are practical repercussions to this for you when you adopt a kitten. Right from the very first day, you should give it its isolation field: a place where no-one will come and disturb it when it is asleep. The children and the dog of the household will quite naturally want to make contact with the new-comer; but, if your kitten is to develop peacefully, it has to have its own private place- which it may later on decide to change. You should not systematically remove all the marks made by the cat rubbing itself against things in its new home. It is very important for it to be able to find its pheromones if it is not to develop an anxiety state.

Uncleanliness and marking

Cats are toilet-trained from very early on, and one is often struck by the sight of a little kitten three weeks old struggling to get up into its cat-litter to relieve itself there. This reputation is a well founded one, and so it is only all the more disappointing for a cat-owner to find that his or her cat is not clean. To avoid this, there are a few precautions to take. The elimination field should have certain features, and, however self-evident some of these may be, in practice experience shows that they are not always fully respected. The cat-box with the litter in it needs to be constantly accessible, including at night. Remember that cats were originally nocturnal animals. By dint of living with humans, they may focus on daytime activity, but they still may well keep certain times during the night for specific occupations. The place you choose has to enable your cat to relieve itself without any problems.

If children are playing in the same room, or the dog is liable to come over and sniff the cat on its litter, then the conditions are not the best possible and accidents may ensue. The litter should be changed frequently.

Finally, do not confuse uncleanliness and marking.

Some cats use urinary marking, and the sequence here is highly characteristic. The cat stands up straight on its legs, rather than crouching down as it does to relieve itself, and sends shots of urine on to vertical supports. This is highly typical of a cat whose territory has been disrupted and who is failing to find its familiarity landmarks.

As between uncleanliness, elimination and marking, the easiest and most effective thing to do is to talk with your Vet about it right away. He or she will be able to distinguish between the different hypotheses and to suggest a solution to you. One way or the other, do not delay. The earlier the diagnosis, the better the result. And if any of this does happen to you, do not get depressed about it: despite their reputation for cleanliness, a survey has shown that 30% of cats fail to be clean at one time or another in their lives.

Playing and hunting

No doubt being more naturally a predator than dogs are, cats need to play, miming hunting and predation. Puppies focus on social games, whereas your kitten will spend hours chasing paper or cloth prey.

It is very important that you should join in these games so as to check your kitten's self-control mechanisms. It is by playing with you that it can learn to control its biting and scratching and to be careful with certain parts of your body.

But it is equally necessary to let your kitten have plenty of opportunity to play at hunting.

Balls of tin-foil which catch the light, and any kind of mobile hanging on a string and which can move in the slightest breeze or draught, help make a rich environment and are vital to your kitten's harmonious development.

A lack of stimuli and of imaginary prey can cause the animal to show aggression to the sole mobile features to be found in its environment: viz., its owners' feet and hands. If you encounter this problem- especially with a cat living in what is a favourable environment- do not hesitate to speak about it with your Vet.

Claude Beata, Veterinary Surgeon

Cats are fascinating animals, with behaviour which is both familiar and wild. It is a daily joy to share one's home with a happy cat. Recent knowledge concerning a means of communication greatly used by cats- pheromones- lets us better understand them and provide them with a suitable habitat. The quality of the affective bond we can form with a cat is a source of peace and well-being. The sight of its games and postural mimicry will delight you. And, if even so your cat has strange or unwelcome behaviour, be sure not to wait until things get critical before talking about it to your Vet.