



## Kitten Behavior Basics

### What to expect in your cat's first 18 months (and how to make the most of them)

Mothers are key to having a happy, secure kitten: well-socialized cats are more likely to have well-socialized kittens. Kittens often mirror their mothers' calm or fearful attitude toward people; this is a normal part of their socialization.

But you can play a vital role, too: by petting, talking to and playing with your new kitten, you can help her develop good "people skills."

Here are general guidelines for kittens' stages of development that provide an outline of what to expect during their first 18 months of life.

You'll also find tips that will help you and your kitten get the most out of those important first 18 months.

### Birth to 2 weeks: the neonatal period

- Kittens learn to orient toward sound.
- Eyes begin opening; they are usually open by 2 weeks old.
- Competition for rank and territory begins. Separation from mother and littermates at this point can lead to poor learning skills and aggression toward people and other pets.

Kittens who are gently handled 15 to 40 minutes a day during their first seven weeks are more likely to develop larger brains.

### 2 to 7 weeks: kittens become social

By the third week, sense of smell is well-developed, and kittens can see well enough to find their mother.

- By the fourth week, sense of smell is fully mature and sense of hearing is well-developed. Kittens start to interact with littermates and can walk fairly well. The teeth start to come in.
- By the fifth week, eyesight is fully mature, and kittens can right themselves, run, place their feet precisely, avoid obstacles, stalk and pounce and catch "prey" with their eyes.

- Kittens start to groom themselves and others.
- By the sixth and seventh weeks, kittens begin to develop adult sleeping patterns, motor skills and social interaction abilities.

Kittens are usually weaned at six to seven weeks, but they may continue to suckle for comfort as their mother gradually leaves them for longer periods of time. Orphaned kittens, or those weaned too soon, are more likely to exhibit inappropriate suckling behaviors later in life, such as sucking on blankets, pillows or your arm. Ideally, kittens should stay with their littermates (or other "role-model" cats) for at least 12 weeks.

## **7 to 14 weeks: play, play, play**

- Social and object play increases kitten's physical coordination and social skills. Most learning is by observation, preferably of their mother.
- Social play includes belly-ups, hugging, ambushing and licking.
- Object play includes scooping, tossing, pawing, mouthing and holding.
- Combined social/object play includes tail chasing, pouncing, leaping and dancing.

## **3 to 6 months: ranking the household**

- Kittens are most influenced by their "litter," which may now include playmates of other species.
- Kittens begin to see and use ranking (dominance or submission) within household, including humans.

## **6 to 18 months: adolescence**

- Kittens increase exploration of dominance, including challenging humans.
- If not spayed or neutered, kittens experience beginnings of sexual behavior.

## **All stages: Interactions are important to your kitten**

Kittens orphaned or separated from their mother and/or littermates too early often fail to develop appropriate "social skills," such as learning how to send and receive signals, what an "inhibited bite" (acceptable mouthing pressure) means, how far to go in play-wrestling and so forth.

Play is important for kittens because it increases their physical coordination, social skills and learning limits. By interacting with their mother and littermates, kittens explore the ranking process ("who's in charge") and also learn "how to be a cat."

Kittens who are gently handled by people 15 to 40 minutes a day during the first seven weeks are more likely to develop larger brains. They're more exploratory, more playful and better learners. Skills not acquired during the first eight weeks may be lost forever.

While these stages are important and fairly consistent, a cat's mind remains receptive to new experiences and lessons well beyond kittenhood. Most cats are still kittens, in mind and body, through the first two years of life.

*Adapted from material originally developed by applied animal behaviorists at the Dumb Friends League, Denver, Colorado. All rights reserved.*

## **About Napa Humane**

The Humane Society of Napa County and SPCA, known as Napa Humane, is a non-profit organization incorporated in 1973. Recognizing that companion animals are an important part of healthy communities, we've grown to consider Napa Humane a community service organization. Our programs and services are designed to address the needs of animals – and also to provide support, education, and assistance for all the people who care for and about them.

Napa Humane is a private and independent organization that is supported by private donations by individuals and businesses, bequests, and fees for service. We receive no government funding, tax dollars or funding from national animal welfare organizations.

### **Our Mission**

To promote the welfare of companion animals through protection, advocacy, education, and by example.