

Kitten Care

Must-Know Tips for Raising Kittens

Raising a kitten is one of the most fun things you'll ever do, but it's also a big responsibility. The following guide will walk you through the basics of how to take care of that playful, purring bundle of fur.

Kittens are so cute, it's understandable that cat owners sometimes wish their kittens could stay kittens forever. This is the when you, as the pet parent, lay the foundation for your cat's future health and behavior. Not to mention, it's the stage where you have to decide what food to buy, what vet to visit, and where to place the litterbox. Fortunately, all of your hard work during these first few months is compensated by loads of snuggling and adorability.

When it comes to raising kittens, the philosophy is pretty similar to that of bringing up children. If you provide proper care and training when they're young, it increases the odds they'll grow up to be healthy, well-adjusted adults. So if you recently adopted a kitten, start incorporating this advice as soon as possible.

Gear Up

Here's a list of the most essential items you'll want to have before bringing your kitten home:

1. Quality food, specifically formulated for kittens
2. Collar and ID tags
3. Food and water bowls
4. Litterbox, cat litter, and a litter scoop
5. A comfortable, warm cat bed
6. Cat carrier
7. Scratching post
8. Kitten safe toys, no small pieces that your kitten can swallow
9. Cat brush

1) Don't Treat Your Kitten Like an Adult Cat

Just as a human infant has vastly different needs than a teenager, a kitten will have care requirements distinct from those of a fully matured cat. In addition, you should consider a kitten's various stages of development when caring for him/her:

Under eight weeks of age. At this early age, a kitten should still be with her mother and litter mates. Because kittens this young are unable to regulate their own temperatures, they rely on one-another's body heat to survive. In addition, they are still developing vision and leg coordination. If you adopt or foster an orphan kitten in this age group, special care will need to be taken, including bottle-feeding the kitten for every two hours up to four weeks of age and possibly helping your kitten pee and poop. It's best to consult with a veterinarian for specific instructions and advice.

Eight to eleven weeks of age. Kittens are usually weaned by eight weeks and should be eating kitten diet, which needs to be energy dense, rich in protein and highly digestible. Whether choosing dry kibble or wet food, be sure it is formulated for kittens. Other big changes will start occurring during this period as well. As your kitten begins developing complex motor skills she will become a force of nature — running, jumping, playing and exploring. This is a delightful period of kittenhood, but also one that can be dangerous to your kitten if she isn't appropriately supervised. Start setting boundaries for your kitten and keep her in a safe, enclosed room while you can supervise her.

Two to four months of age. This is a phase of rapid growth for kittens in which they'll have almost three times more energy than an adult cat. They'll need three to four individual meals a day during this time. According to Vetstreet.com, these meals should be minimum 30 percent high-quality protein.

Four to six months of age. Kittens in this age group are reaching adolescence and, thus, sexual maturity. Talk to a veterinarian about

having your kitten spayed or neutered before your kitten reaches this stage to avoid unpleasant habits like territorial spraying and accidental litters.

2) Reward Good Behavior and Socialize, Socialize, Socialize

The socialization and training your cat receives during kittenhood will affect how well he/she will likely interact with people and other animals when she's older. Just make sure your kittens have a positive experience out of any socialization exposure you provide them.

As a new kitten's parent, it will be up to you to guide him/her and show your kitten that the world is a wonderful place. Consider trying some of these training and socialization methods:

Kittens will generally use litter boxes by instinct, however you can help teach him/her to use it by placing your kitten in the box after meals and play sessions. Make sure the litter box is always available to your kitten and cleaned frequently.

Pet your kitten frequently.

Get your kitten used to weekly combing and grooming.

Introduce it to toys.

Allow it to experience different walking surfaces (carpet, linoleum, etc.)

Take him/her outside on a lead or in a pet carrier (It can be very dangerous to allow a kitten outside without one.) However, before providing any outdoor exposure be sure your veterinarian has administered the proper vaccines and enough time has passed for your kitten to build immunity.

Give him/her objects to explore, such as boxes and paper bags.

Play loud music and make noise.

Have friends over and ask them to play with him/her and give it treats.

Provide appropriate scratching alternatives (such as scratching posts) and reward her with toys, praise or treats when he/she uses them.

Do not allow him/her to bite or scratch during play. If she does, redirect her attention to a toy.

Expose him/her to other cats and kittens (as soon as they're up to date on vaccinations, of course!). There are even kitten socialization classes; do an internet search to see if any are available in your area.

Take your kitten on car rides, giving her treats the whole time, and get her used to her carrier.

Reward friendly behavior with treats or praise.

Do not reprimand bad behavior, instead, ignore her when he/she displays inappropriate behavior.

Challenge your kitten to think by teaching it tricks.

Always be patient

3) Make Preventive Care a Priority

To help ensure your kitty has a lifetime of good health, start early in providing it with preventive care:

Schedule an appointment early. No matter what, schedule your kitten's first vet appointment within a week of getting her. Early and frequent vet visits will help socialize your kitten with the vet and help the vet establish a baseline for your kitten's health.

Ask about intestinal parasites, fleas and heartworm. Have a veterinarian check your kitten for worms and intestinal parasites, and have her de-wormed, if necessary. And while heartworms aren't as much of a problem for cats as they are for dogs, some kittens may be susceptible, so also ask your vet if he/she recommends a heartworm preventative. The biggest parasitic threat to your kitten, however, is fleas. You can start administering topical flea preventatives when your

kitten is around 8 to 12 weeks of age — although some brands are formulated for kittens as young as 4 weeks old.

Ask which vaccinations your kitten needs and how often: Preventive care for kittens may include vaccines for feline leukemia, rabies and distemper. These shots are usually first administered when a kitten is around 8 weeks of age, with boosters given every few weeks until it reaches 16 weeks of age. After that, your veterinarian can set your kitten up on an adult vaccination schedule. He/she may also recommend additional vaccinations. These building blocks will give your kitten the best possible start in life, but don't forget that it'll still need plenty of attention and care when it gets older.