

HOW TO RAISE A KITTEN

A condensation of an article from Cat Fancy

Introductions

Before the kitten ever sets paw in your home, secure a qualified veterinarian for the kitten's regular checkups and in case of emergencies.

When your new kitten comes home, take it slow and easy. Kittens can only take so much excitement before needing a long nap to recover and prepare for more. Your kitten will be a member of your household for 15 to 20 years, so don't rush things.

Kitten-proofing

Your preparations should involve kitten-proofing your home. To prevent tragedy, try to look at your home through a kitten's eyes. It may help to get down on the floor at kitten level and consider what might be dangerous or tempting to a little one.

Like small children, kittens explore by putting objects in their mouths. Keep the following items out of your kitten's reach: needles, pins, thread, string, yard, fishhooks, bones, Christmas tree needles, tinsel, broken glass, aluminum foil, plastic wrap, foam rubber, poisonous houseplants, insecticides, rodent poisons, harsh cleansers, phenol or pine oil (as found in some common liquid cleaners), antifreeze, plastic bags, rubber bands, and cellophane.

Don't forget to examine your furniture and appliances. Rocking chairs and recliners can crush a small tail or paw. A hot iron can fall on a kitten playing with a cord. An upper-story window left open without a screen, even for a second, can spell trouble. Make sure your kitten does not become trapped in the freezer, refrigerator, kitchen cabinets, drawers, washing machine or dryer. Teach the kitten to stay off the stove and kitchen counters.

Your kitten will probably go through a teething stage, chewing on just about anything regardless of hazard. To prevent harmful chewing, coat electric cords with an awful tasting substance such as "Bitter Apple," a cream available in pet stores and veterinary clinics. Eventually the kitten will settle into your home, but you need to look out for its safety and welfare - especially in the beginning.

The Litter Box

When your kitten comes home, you should have a litter box ready for it to use. Litter boxes come in several styles and sizes. A covered box allows your kitten privacy and helps keep litter inside, where it belongs. Your new kitten may not be familiar with this strange contraption, so place the kitten inside to help it get the idea.

Another option in litter boxes is a rimmed box. This box has a removable rim, allowing the kitten to step over the sides but preventing most litter from being kicked out. It is easy to inspect and scoop. You can also choose the basic box with no bells and whistles. As a general rule, a large, roomy box is preferable to a small one. Make sure that the sides are low enough for a little kitten to climb over, however.

The most important aspects of the litter box are accessibility and cleanliness. Kittens learn quickly what a litter box is for, but they are impulsive and often have to go in a hurry. It is critical that the kitten is never far from a litter box. Do not, for example, expect a kitten to find the box if it is kept on a different floor of the house. In the beginning, have one on every floor.

Early on, introduce your kitten to one room at a time so the kitten doesn't become lost and confused and use the most convenient place to relieve itself.

The most common cause of cats having accidents around the house is a dirty litter box. To prevent such accidents, remove wastes daily with a litter scoop. The scoop can be large or small, plastic or metal. If your kitten has an accident on the rug or furniture, you must remove all trace of odor, or the kitten will be attracted to that spot again. Don't forget that many "bad litter box habits" can be avoided by having the kitten spayed or neutered as soon as possible.

Once a week, change the litter and clean the box with a mild detergent or bleach solution. If the litter becomes too wet or smelly, you may need to clean more often. When choosing a litter, keep in mind that perfumed or chlorophyll litters may repulse a cat anxious to use the box. Plain, dust-free litter is the best, most economical choice. Clumping litters also make good choices.

Food and Water

Before you bring home your kitten, try to find out what it has been eating. Sudden changes in food can cause diarrhea, stomach upset or refusal to eat. If you want to change your kitten's diet, do so gradually by slowly adding the brand of food you prefer and eliminating the former brand.

When choosing a diet for your kitten, remember that finicky cats are made, not born. If you offer something more enticing when the kitten doesn't eat the first food offered, you quickly will have a spoiled cat - stick to a good, high quality food.

Grooming

Start your kitten's grooming routine early, and your cat will let you clip its claws and groom its coat. The grooming sessions can be extremely satisfying for you and your cat.

To clip, gently hold the kitten, push the claw out of its sheath by pressing on the kitten's paw, and cut through the translucent part of the claw. If you clip the darker area closest to the paw pad, you will cut through the blood vessels and nerve ending of the claw.

Scratching

You can train almost any cat to scratch a designated area instead of your favorite sofa. Offer the kitten an alternative to the furniture: a scratching post. The post should be large enough and strong enough for the kitten to get a good stretch as it scratches. Teach your kitten that the post is for scratching and the furniture is not.

To encourage appropriate scratching behavior, place the post in an easily accessible area. Whenever you see the kitten scratching something else, place it gently on the post. Rubbing catnip on the post may help reinforce good scratching behavior.

If you allow the kitten access to forbidden furniture only when you are around and consistently reinforce the behavior you want, your kitten will learn what is expected. This applies to any lesson you want your kitten to learn. Your kitten needs to learn the rules of the house from you - it doesn't automatically know what it shouldn't do.

Above all, ENJOY your new family member. A happy cat makes a happy home!

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