

Boroughbred Behavior Resources



Issue: Socializing Kittens

All kittens need to be socialized in order to be happy and confident around people. Kittens who are not socialized at a fairly young age may be forever nervous around people. If you have adopted a kitten that is showing signs of under-socialization or you have been told that your kitten is under-socialized, it is very important that you take the kitten through the process of socialization so that your kitten will enjoy being around humans. The time you spend now will pay off for the rest of your cat's life. Kittens under 4 months of age are good candidates for socialization; kittens 8 weeks of age and under generally socialize easily and quickly (a few days is common), kittens 8-12 weeks of age can take longer, and kittens 12 to 16 weeks of age longer still. Kittens over 4 months of age becomes increasingly hard to socialize and the end result may be that some of these kittens will never fully socialize.

The biggest “trick” to socialization is making the kitten think they are making all the decisions to socialize themselves. Rather than trying to force them and inducing a fear response, we are teaching them to overcome their fear in a natural way. Use this idea to guide you through the entire process.

Signs of Under-Socialization in Kittens - Understand that this isn't aggression, but a fear response.

- Hissing
- Spitting
- Growling
- Pilo-erect fur (fur that stands up)
- Flattened or sideways pointing ears
- Large (dilated) pupils
- Hiding or generally trying to put distance between themselves and you.

The Process of Socialization - You will need:

- High value food like Hartz Delectables Squeeze Ups or baby food from Gerber's or Beach Nut. We recommend chicken or turkey flavors and Stage One for the baby food. Higher stages can include ingredients like onion, which are toxic to cats. Canned kitten food can act as a substitute, but for the initial socialization baby food and Squeeze Ups work very well.
- A spoon, or tongue depressors, or a bartender's spoon which is longer than regular spoons.
- Interactive toys like a feather wand, Cat Dancer and toss-able toys like fake mice and crinkle balls.

It is very important – and this cannot be over-stressed – when you get the kitten home you should give them a very small and quiet environment in which to begin the process of socializing. The single best place in a typical home is the bathroom. A small room like this gives the kitten a sense of confidence, and prevents them from hiding in places that make socialization much, much harder like under a sofa or under the bed! Allowing the kitten to hide in your home (and they will hide!) basically stops the socialization process in its tracks.

Also, do **not** attempt to pet the kitten or pick them up once they are released into the bathroom until instructed below -- this is important because touching the kitten prematurely can set up a fear response to touch before the kitten is ready for this step.

Provide kitten food (just enough to get through the first night), litter and water in the bathroom, and allow the kitten to relax overnight before you start to do much with them. Consider leaving a radio if you have one on a talk radio channel on low volume to help the kitten get used to human voices. Once you begin step one, make sure kitten eats their fill and then pull up all food. They only get to eat when you are present, at least 3 times a day, morning, before your dinner, and before your bedtime. Making sure the kitten is hungry at mealtime is important (and so is making sure they eat all they want during each session. After your session is over it is ok to let them free feed in your presence until they are finally full, then pull up what is left).

Step One - Getting Close to the Kitten

The next day, offer them fresh baby food on a plate or bowl and then sit in the room with the kitten, and see how close you can get without causing them to hiss, show other signs of fear, or stop eating. You want them to eat while you inch closer. The goal is to get close enough so that you will be able to offer the kitten baby food off of a spoon.

Step Two - Feeding the Kitten off a Spoon

Once you can sit near the kitten, begin offering them baby food off the spoon. If they won't come close enough to eat it, they may need to become a little hungrier, but usually this doesn't take long. Give them a little break and come back an hour or two later and try again. If they prefer canned kitten food, you can offer that optionally mixed with a little water so they can lap it, especially if they are very young. (Remember, no petting or picking up yet!)

Step Three - Feeding the Kitten from Your Hand

When kitten is comfortable eating from the spoon (and make sure they are hungry enough for this step) start offering baby food off the tip of your finger (still no petting!). Once they are eating off your finger, you have reached a very important stage – this is the stage where the kitten voluntarily makes contact with your hand, while getting huge pleasure inputs from the food. We are teaching kitten that the hand is a good thing! How fast this takes depends partly on the kitten's age, level of prior socialization, and personality. Don't put the kitten on your schedule; instead allow the kitten to socialize on their schedule.

Once the kitten is comfortable eating from your hand, try getting the kitten to move on to your lap, and eat there. It may be easier at this point to offer kitten a bowl of food that sits on your lap. Now they are getting used to your body. Once this is accomplished you can move to the next step.

Step Four – Petting (Finally!)

Now that the kitten is comfortable eating from your hand, you can begin gentle petting on the head while they are eating off your hand although some kittens actually prefer body petting. If they bob and weave as you try and pet, pull back the petting hand and the feeding hand. Then let them eat again, and then try petting again. If they aren't ready yet don't despair, you're almost there! Finish the session and then try again at the next meal. Once the kitten allows petting on the head, you can gently progress to the body (or vice versa), and once they allow petting all over, you can try petting without using food.

Step Five – Picking Kitten Up

Prepare kitten for this step by gently touching their belly while eating. Then start adding a little upward pressure. When you think they're ready for the pickup (this may take a few sessions) make sure they are eating well and then start gently picking the kitten up and holding them, gently, and right side up (not on their back). Holding them against your body may provide some comfort.

Step Five – Play

Surprise! Step Five can actually be done during the entire process that's described above (steps 1-4). Play is another form of interaction, and by using toys you are giving your kitten a way to interact while keeping your body at a safe distance. Use feather wands, Cat Dancer and toss-able toys like little balls, crinkle toys, and fake mice. When using things like feather wands, try and trick them into accidentally touching your body by dragging the feather over your leg. This gives them an opportunity for touch on their terms.

Congratulations!

You and kitten have made it! You can now slowly introduce the kitten to the rest of your home, one room at a time. You can also start some more advanced techniques designed to prep the kitten for the rest of their life.

- Have people over! Have them take turns holding the kitten and offering treats. Give them treats in the hall, or outside your home so that when they come in they can immediately offer treats. Have them ring the doorbell and then offer treats right away. Teach the kitten that the bell means treat time.
- Expose the kitten to the carrier. Leave it out for them with a towel or little cat bed inside it to use as a den. Give them treats inside the carrier.
- Once they like the carrier, expose the kitten to travel in the carrier, by whatever means you typically travel, especially when going to the vet or visiting a friend or family member, so they won't become afraid of travelling.
- Teach the kitten early that nail trimming isn't a bad thing. Massage their paws regularly before you do your first nail trim. Then offer treats, if possible even while the trimming is happening.

Resources:

<https://www.alleycat.org/community-cat-care/kitten-socialization-how-to/>
<https://www.petmd.com/cat/training/kitten-care-101-how-socialize-kittens>
<https://www.dabird.com/>
<https://www.catdancer.com/>

For more information:

International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants: <https://m.iaabc.org/>
Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists: <http://corecaab.org/>