

# THE BASICS OF KITTEN BEHAVIOR AND PROBLEM PREVENTION

*Meghan E. Herron, DVM, DACVB  
Behavioral Medicine Clinic  
The Ohio State University Veterinary Teaching Hospital  
vet.osu.edu/behavior*

## Development

### Neonatal Period

(0-9days)

- Born blind and deaf
- “Teat order” formed by day 2
- Guided by tactile, thermal and olfactory stimuli
- Hearing starts around day 5
- Anogenital stimulation required for elimination

### Transitional Period

(9-14days)

- Eyes open around day 7-10
- Grooming emerges
- Start orienting to sound
- Begin standing and walking

### Socialization Period

(2-7 weeks)

- Social relationships with people and animals formed
- Object and social play begins
- Spontaneous elimination
- Weaning starts around 4 weeks
- Learn to escape painful stimuli
- Fear response begins and persists
- Can learn from bad experiences

### Juvenile Period

(7weeks - 5months)

- Weaning complete
- May suckle intermittently beyond 1 year
- Social play peaks and declines
- Independence increases
- Important for social interactions and handling to continue
- Sexual maturity reached between 5-9 months

### Social Development

- Attachment to humans develops 2-7 weeks
  - Early handling for 10 minutes twice daily increases friendliness
  - Strong paternal effect on friendliness

- increased handling in kittens before 8 weeks of age increases boldness for the 1<sup>st</sup> year, but genetics have a more substantial influence beyond 1 year of age
- Relationships with other animals
  - Need exposure to other cats/kittens in a positive fashion before 12 weeks of age
  - If raised with puppies, they do not show fear of them as adults
  - If not exposed to dogs before 12 weeks of age, they show fearful, defensive behaviors
  - If raised with rats, will not hunt them as adults

#### Development of Play

- Social play with mother and siblings
  - Begins around 3 weeks
  - Pawing, wrestling, rolling
  - 4 bouts of play per day
  - 1 hr per day spent on play at 9 weeks
  - Starts to decline around 12 weeks
  - Play takes on more of a predatory form as the socialization period progresses
    - Stalking, staring, pouncing, biting, chasing
    - Normal part of play between kittens
- Object play high at 8 weeks
  - Males and females with male littermates show more object contact
  - Early weaned cats show earlier object play
  - Kittens of undernourished mothers show more object play

#### Development of Predatory Behavior

- Queen brings prey to kittens around 4 weeks
  - Begins with mother attacking and eating prey in front of kittens
  - Allows kittens to catch and eat over time
  - Kittens cannot kill prey on own until 8 weeks
  - Maternal preference for prey has strong influence on kitten choice later in life

#### Setting Up for Success

- Litter box training and hygiene
- Socialization
- Carrier training
- Environment of plenty
- Appropriate play outlets

#### The Litter Box

- Most cats have an innate preference to eliminate in fine, sandy substrates
  - Litter box
  - Potted plants?

- Sand box?
- May need to confine kitten initially for first few days until reliably using box

#### Dynamics of box

- Large
  - Enter, turn around, dig, turn around, eliminate, turn around, cover, exit, shake off paws
- Uncovered
  - Most cats prefer uncovered in a quiet area
- Clumping litter
  - Preferred texture and keeps odor down
- Unscented litter
  - Heavy perfumes can be aversive
- Scoop daily
  - Consider this the “daily flush”
  - Some cats will not use an unscooped box
- Change out monthly or as odor requires
  - Clean with warm, soapy water
  - Avoid bleach and ammonia-based cleaners
- No liners
  - Claws can get caught when digging/covering and may lead to litter box aversion
- Multiple boxes – “N + 1” rule: one litter box per number of cats plus one
- Multiple locations
  - Easily accessible
  - Every floor of household
  - Especially important in multiple cat household

#### Socialization

- People
  - Adults, children, visitors
  - Need to have a positive experience
  - FOOD and PLAY
- Animals
  - Other cats, dogs
  - Must be kitten-appropriate and friendly
- Handling
  - Nail trims, brushing, dental care
  - Associate with FOOD and PLAY
- Veterinary clinic experience
  - Cold table
  - Thermometer
  - Injection

- Nail trim
  - ALL should be associated with FOOD
  - Squeeze cheese, canned food, fish heads, baby food
- “Clipnosis” – pinch-induced behavioral inhibition
  - Can induce relaxed state in most cats
  - Should also be associated with FOOD

#### Carrier Training

- Free Access Crate Training (*FACT*) - M. Milani
  - Establishes a safe retreat for the cat
  - Need to create a positive association with the carrier over time
  - Start with just the bottom of the carrier, soft bedding, food and water
  - May add a small litter box if anticipate long periods of travel later in life
  - Place in a quiet area, preferably up off of the floor
  - Add top of carrier once using regularly
  - Add door and close periodically while cat is relaxed and has a food item
    - Offering a highly palatable food item daily will help retain positive association
      - Squeeze cheese on inside walls, baby food, tuna or chicken bits, fish heads
- Feliway spray may make carrier more appealing
- Take for short trips in the car once comfortable
- Work up to longer trips with time
- More positive travel experience at a young age will set them up for success with travel as adults

#### Environment of Plenty

- Resting areas
- Scratching options
- Entertainment
- “Safe haven”
- Chewing options

#### Resting areas

- Kittens should have access to high resting places
- Provide multiple hiding options
- Soft bedding will make resting areas more appealing

#### Appropriate scratching options

- Scratching is a **NORMAL** behavior
  - Nail maintenance
  - Visual and olfactory marking
- Vertical and horizontal options
- Rough and textured material is most appealing, such as corrugated cardboard or sisal
- Place posts close to resting areas

- Often scratch upon waking
- Cover or “booby trap” furniture that owner does not want damaged
  - Double-sided tape panels – “Sticky Paws”
  - Cans on strings of yarn – caution if history of string ingestion
  - Ssscat motion-sensing spray deterrent

#### Kitty Entertainment

- Toys
  - Interactive with owner preferred
  - Hidden hunting options
  - Rotate weekly
- TV entertainment
  - “Video Catnip” DVD
- Window perch
  - Bird feeder?

#### Safe Haven

- Quiet refuge
- Each cat should have his or her own area
- Access to own food, water, scratching post and litter box
- Electronic cat door access

#### Chewing Options

- Remove toxic plants from household
- Provide safe, appealing options
  - Kitty grass
  - Fresh catnip
  - Jerky
- Make houseplants aversive if needed
  - Cayenne pepper
  - Hot sauce
  - Perfume

#### Appropriate Play Outlets

- Kittens typically have four play bouts per day
- One hour per day total play time is normal
- Morning and evening are times of highest activity
  - Owners should anticipate these times
  - Kittens will find ways to meet these needs if owner does not provide them
- Interactive play
  - Owner involvement
    - Begin play session before kitten pesters for it
    - Interactive toys

- Laser pointer
- Always end laser games with a treat or toy to prevent frustration
- Crinkly balls, balls with bells or food inside
- AVOID rough play and play with owner hands and feet
- Self-entertaining play
  - Panic mouse – battery operated
  - Ping-pong balls in a bathtub
  - SlimCat food puzzle toy
- Another kitten
  - Can meet each other’s play needs
  - Familiarity increases time adults cat spend together
- Training
  - Provides mental stimulation
  - Strengthens bond between owner and cat
  - Clicker training
    - “Sit”
    - “Stay”
    - “Touch”
    - “High five”

#### Punishment in Kittens

- Avoid the use of direct punishment for inappropriate play, chewing, scratching, eliminating!
  - Remember play, scratching, & chewing are NORMAL behaviors
  - Redirect to appropriate chew, scratch, play or elimination outlets
  - Confine to safe haven to give owner a break and allow kitten to utilize interactive food or play toys if needed
  - Cats DO NOT learn by force
  - Punishment may create fear of owner and lead to aggression
  - Cats will likely learn to show undesirable behaviors when owner is not present
  - Remote, non-painful punishment as last resort
    - “Booby traps”, Ssscat, foul tastes, etc.

#### How do we get all of this information to kitten owners?

- Allot more time for vaccine appointments
  - Technician can provide most owner education before veterinary exam
- Check lists
  - Divide behavior and health topics among the vaccine appointment series
- Handouts and reading lists
- Kitten kindergarten
  - Set up your own!
  - Appropriate health screening
- Veterinary Behaviorist
  - “Head Start” problem prevention appointments

### Further Reading

- *Clicker Training for Cats* – Karen Pryor
- *Domestic Animal Behavior* – Katherine Houpt
- *From the Cat's Point of View* – Gwen Bohnenkamp
- *Handbook of Behavior Problems of the Dog and Cat* – Gary Landsberg, Wayne Hunthausen, Lowell Ackerman
- *Low stress handling, restraint and behavior modification of dogs & cats : techniques for developing patients who love their visits* – Sophia Yin
- *The Domestic Cat: The Biology of its Behaviour* – Dennis Turner & Patrick Bateson
- Pozza et al. Pinch-induced behavioral inhibition ('clipnosis') in domestic cats. *Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery* 2008;10:82-87.