

You'll Never Know What Your Cat Is Capable of if You Ignore This

Brilliant animal behaviorist says it's a key way to ensure kittens find and stay loved in their forever homes, handle everyday stresses well, and be playful and fun. Bring out all the best your kitty has in store and make your life as a pet parent easier too.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Just like puppies, kittens need lots of positive experiences and adventures during their first few months of life to grow into well-adjusted adult cats
- Steps to a well-adjusted kitten include lots of gentle handling, socialization, crate (carrier) training and taking kitty along with you whenever possible to expose her to new places
- Another excellent tool is kitten kindergarten, which helps kitties learn positive behaviors and gives them the opportunity to interact and play with people and other kittens
- Another crucial component in raising a well-adjusted cat is getting her very comfortable with a carrier at home, long before you need to take her somewhere in it
- Purchase the carrier and set it up in a quiet, low-traffic area of your home where your kitten hangs out

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Just like puppies, kittens develop a big part of their adult personality during their first few months. The experiences your kitten has during this important period of brain development will influence her behavior and temperament for the rest of her life.

According to the late Dr. Sophia Yin, a brilliant animal behaviorist, one of the best ways to ensure kittens find and remain in forever homes is to socialize them,¹ which is to say, give them positive experiences with lots of different people, animals, unfamiliar cats, new environments and human handling.

Kittens exposed to these things during the critical developmental period of 8 to 15 weeks are more likely to be friendly and social adult cats. They are also better equipped to handle the everyday stresses of life, such as a change in their human's work schedule, or the arrival of a new member of the household.

4 Steps to a Well-Adjusted Kitten

The following recommendations from veterinary journal dvm360 are a good way to get your tiny furry family member off on the right paw in life.² Just remember not to force anything on her. Make sure each step is done in a way that's comfortable for your kitten, and if she shows signs of fear in a particular situation, don't keep exposing her to it.

1. **Handle your kitten — literally —** Make a point to touch your kitten all over. Don't ever be forceful or push to the point of struggle. Just touch and hold gently and reward his acceptance with a special treat or gentle pet (kittens love to be stroked on both sides of their faces).

Remember that eventually you'll need to be able to trim his claws, clean his ears and brush his teeth. If your new kitten is conditioned to enjoy these rituals, or at least tolerate them, it will be much less stressful for both of you.

2. **Socialize with your kitten —** Let your kitten meet people of all shapes, sizes and mannerisms to learn there's nothing to fear from people of all kinds. Introduce children, men and women, and even people with hats or costumes — Halloween comes around once a year. Don't forget the treats to make "scary" fun! Warn everyone to go slowly and speak softly, because kittens can be cautious by nature.
3. **Keep the peace (of mind) —** Since your kitten will need to visit the veterinarian throughout her life, you can make the experience much less stressful by training her early not to fear the cat carrier (more about this shortly).
4. **Adventure with your kitten —** You and your cat will experience all life has to offer together, but the experiences won't be as fun if he's afraid or difficult to handle. Take your kitten wherever you can for exposure to new places. Visit your veterinarian just to say hi and offer kitty some yummy treats. And don't forget to make his carrier into a kitty nirvana, because that's the way you can keep travel with him the safest.

Science shows it's easier for brains to remember bad experiences than good ones, so make sure your foundation for your kitten's brain is filled with terrific associations. You can avoid big problems in the future and, let's face it, handling and spending time with your kitten is a ton of fun!

Also Consider Enrolling Your Little One in Kitten Kindergarten

It used to be that only puppies were thought to need socialization and behavior training, but in recent years classes designed to train and socialize young cats and their humans have cropped up all across North America. Kitten kindergarten is designed specifically for kittens 8 to 15 weeks of age who have received their first set of kitten shots. This is the period during which they are most receptive and open to learning new things and bonding with other kitties and humans.

During the meet-ups, young cats have the opportunity to interact and play with people and other kittens. The classes are typically equipped with a variety of cat toys, scratching posts and litterboxes, and involve games to help kitties develop proper social and play behavior.

The goal of kitten kindergarten is to teach positive behaviors, which will help prevent the development of troublesome behaviors in the future. For example, it's especially important for kittens who were taken from their mother and littermates too soon to engage in activities that teach bite inhibition.

Another benefit of the classes is that they typically take place over several weeks, which helps kittens get accustomed to going in and out of their carriers and riding in the car. And if the classes happen to be held at a veterinary clinic, kittens get accustomed to that environment as well.

When you enroll your kitten in a kindergarten class, you'll be told what supplies to bring. Common items include a cat harness and leash, and a brush. Part of your kitten's training will involve learning to accept being brushed and having sensitive areas of her body handled (e.g., paws, tail, ears and inside her mouth). Some of the behaviors Dr. Yin and her staff taught in their kitten classes (you can find demonstration pictures [**here**](#)):

- Sit for a treat
- Respond to a come-here-and-sit command for a treat
- Targeting (involving the kitten touching an object with her nose), which can be used to teach many tricks such as spin, sit pretty, go into your litterbox and come play with me
- Accept being held by offering food during handling
- Providing good experiences while the kitten is restrained, for example, holding him while offering canned food in a syringe

When they have the skills to cope, cats are much less likely to "act out" as kitties do when they're stressed — by spraying, for example, or eliminating outside the litterbox. They're also better able to be full members of the family rather than fearful cats who live under the bed.

How to Help Your Kitten Get Comfortable with a Carrier

- Purchase the carrier and set it up in a quiet, low-traffic area of your home where your kitten hangs out. Place some comfy bedding in there, and prop or tie the door open so that it can't accidentally close. Kitty may get curious enough to begin going in and out on her own.
- The next step is to entice her with food, so place her food bowl close to the carrier. Add a small amount of a special treat she loves on top of her meal to further tempt her. Once kitty is eating from the bowl without hesitation, start moving it closer each meal, until she's eating comfortably very close to the carrier.
- Next, place the food bowl inside the carrier, right at the entrance, so she can reach bites of food without having to actually step inside.
- Put a few of your kitty's favorite toys and treats into the carrier at random times. The idea is to associate only pleasant, fun and yummy things with the carrier each time she investigates it. Consider placing some organic catnip in there. Spraying a feline facial pheromone like Feliway in the carrier several times a week can also be very beneficial, or using stress-reducing flower essences for anxiety or fear.
- After several days of eating out of her food bowl placed just inside the carrier entrance, it's time to move the dish further in. Move it a few inches toward the back of the carrier each day, until she's standing completely inside as she eats.
- Once kitty is feeling at home in her carrier, try closing the door for a very short time with her inside, making sure to let her out before she becomes anxious or panics. Slowly extend the time in the crate by 30 seconds to a minute during each practice session.

When you can close the door for significant periods of time without upsetting her, you can start bringing her along on short car rides to get her accustomed to being in her carrier in a moving car.

Each time you return home with kitty, go right back to providing meals, toys and treats in the crate so she continues to associate her carrier with goodness. Ideally, **your cat will come to view her carrier as a comfy, safe space.**

Sources and References

[dvm360 April 17, 2018 \(Archived\)](#)

¹ [DrSophiaYin.com \(Archived\)](#)

² [dvm360 Client Handout: New Kitten Socialization \(Archived\)](#)
