

UNDER CONSTRUCTION!

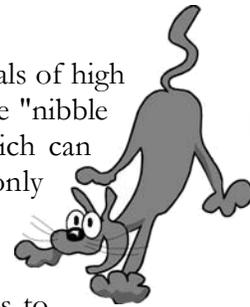
A kitten is not a small cat. A kitten is an infant; a cat under construction. The first two weeks are spent in darkness, the eyes not yet opened. At one month of age, vision is fuzzy; by two months, complex visual tasks can be performed. Teeth cut the gum shortly before two weeks of age and continue until the fifth week. These milk teeth begin to loosen and fall out, replaced by adult teeth, beginning at about 14 weeks of age. By the age of five weeks, kittens can go to the bathroom without mom's assistance; prior to this, mom had to stimulate each kitten, by licking it, to pass body waste. A kitten under seven weeks cannot regulate and maintain his body temperature. Caring for an orphan presents a challenge. With no littermates to bundle up with, the orphan can rapidly lose body heat, a threat to life. It is not until eight weeks of age that a kitten begins to show adult-like responses to threatening social situations. A kitten in this age group must be adequately protected from adventurous pets and kids.

Kittens grow rapidly between two and six months of age; they need three to four meals of high quality kitten food (no milk, please) daily. Feeding individual meals is preferred to the "nibble all day long" method. Random eating habits may lead to random toilet habits which can make box training quite difficult. Remember, you want the cat to learn that there is only one bathroom in the house ... and the litter box is it.

It is not until six to seven weeks of age that a kitten can walk, trot and run in an adult manner. While that's going on, the kitten develops eye/paw coordination. This leads to object play or the ability to move small objects around, like a bottle cap on a wood floor at 3:00 am! This behavior peaks at about eight weeks of age. Locomotor play, more commonly described as ripping around like a maniac, also develops rapidly at this age. Complex motor abilities and other daring feats, such as jumping onto, walking along and turning around on a narrow plank or railing, may not be fully developed until 10 -11 weeks of age. A kitten of this age must be provided with lots of supervision; he can climb up, but can't turn around to come back down. Additionally, you will want to be there to define "off-limits" areas (drapery valance) to the budding athlete.

Supervised exposure to physical and mental challenges like inclines, see-saws, mazes and tunnels, and different textures (think jungle gym!) encourage the development of self assuredness. Kittens that are left for long hours to amuse themselves often develop into adults that lack confidence, become introverted or independent. Unfortunately, many people accept aberrant (shy, fearful, timid, aggressive or anxious) behavior in cats; most are unaware that they participated in its development by not being able to meet their infant cat's daily need for adventure, activity, structure and feedback. These cats are referred to as "freaky," "schizo," or "quirky." Those humans without a sense of humor or commitment prefer not to live with it (attacking guests, household destruction, self-mutilation, etc.) and may deposit the now neurotic adult at the local shelter for re-homing!

Social relationships, which depend so much on familiarity, are readily formed during the first two months after birth. Humans or members of other species incorporated within the kitten's social group at this stage will elicit lifelong associations. It is important that the kitten remain with the litter; people are added to the circle of friends, not substituted. Exposure to men, women and children of all ages will help the kitten grow into a confident adult rather than the "scaredy cat" that runs at the first sounds of houseguests!



SANTA CRUZ SPCA ANIMAL CARE

Cat Care

Proper socialization and handling can make the difference between a cat that is calm, self-assured and resilient and one that is rigid, anxious and unable to cope with stress.

Kittens born to a well adjusted mother (one that reacts appropriately in response to human and feline social interactions) have been provided with a good model for future behavior. A mother that hisses and runs at the sight of a toddler is demonstrating to her kittens exactly what to do when a child appears. Social play becomes prevalent by four weeks of age and continues to peak until 12-14 weeks.

Social play-fights can escalate into serious confrontations, especially during the third month. Social play patterns will become increasingly predatory in nature: more stalking, pouncing, pawing and biting. Kittens that have been removed from the litter and live within a human household also go through this stage of development, with the increased predatory play-fighting directed at the caretaker. Feet and hands are primary targets and become fair game in wave after wave of sneak attacks! Now is the time to set

boundaries as well as divert the kitten's attention to something more appropriate ("Here, let's play with this pull toy"). A kitten that spends too much time alone in a non-responsive environment (locked in bathroom for 10 hours while caretaker is at work plus another seven while caretaker is asleep) can become quite "wild," pouncing, scratching and biting without inhibition.



As the kitten gets older, play can also turn sexual. Kittens as young as four months of age will mount each other and posture. Biting and holding, a simulated mating behavior, is what can happen to a hand that was innocently petting a now sexually aroused cat! Male and female cats should be spayed and neutered between two and six months of age to prevent unwanted sexually related behaviors that include mounting, spraying, increased aggression and territoriality, heightened nighttime activity and yowling (not to mention the unwanted litter that will be conceived when your sex maniac escapes to answer nature's call).

KITTEN FACTS *(developmental tidbits based on scientific and observational studies)*

Kittens are well adapted towards learning from their mother. Neonate kittens tend to imitate their mother's choice of food, even if it is a food normally not eaten by cats. Kittens who watch their mothers perform a certain task (i.e. use litter box) were able to acquire the response quickly, whereas kittens that were given the opportunity to acquire the response solely by trial and error, with rare exception, never did.

Kittens that were separated from their mother at two weeks of age subsequently developed a variety of behavioral, emotional and physical abnormalities. They became unusually fearful and aggressive towards other cats and people. In addition they exhibited large amounts of random and undirected activity (busy, busy, BUSY) and were slow learners. Social experiences with litter mates also seems to play a role in development of later social skills. Hand-reared orphans were much slower in forming social attachments and social skills.

Several studies have shown that kittens of undernourished mothers subsequently exhibit a variety of behavioral and growth abnormalities. They showed poorer learning ability, antisocial behavior towards other cats, heightened emotionality characterized by abnormal levels of fear and aggression. The kittens lost balance more often, indicating possible abnormalities in their motor development.

Undernourished kittens under six weeks of age eventually achieved normal body size after receiving an adequate diet, but exhibited a number of behavioral abnormalities and differences in brain development. When making the decision to live with a cat or add an additional cat to your household, it is important to consider all factors including age and background. Can you give the undernourished stray kitten the extra care and attention that he will need in an effort to help him become confident and well adjusted? Will he still fit in if he does manifest some of the behavior problems that are associated with his less than ideal background? Reading upon feline behavior can help you make behavioral adjustments in an informed way.

By Micky Niego, ©ASPCA

