

Decoding Behavior: Kittens



Start your kitten off right! Behaviors will change over your kitten's lifespan, but right now these areas are most important: socialization, introductions, environmental needs, and handling.

Socialization

- Introducing kittens to the events, experiences, and people they will encounter in their lives
- It's not just exposing kittens, but ensuring those **exposures are positive** - paired with something good like food, treats, or pets
- Watch kittens for signs of fear (**not readily approaching, avoiding**); if this occurs, the socialization should be done more slowly, starting at a further distance and gradually decreasing the distance
- **Letting the kitten set the pace** will ensure they have control in the situation and are able to build those healthy, positive associations

Introductions

- It's best to proceed slowly when introducing a new kitten to any other pets as these should be positive and **supervised** encounters - everyone deserves their safe space & time to adjust
- Slow introductions can be facilitated by sharing blankets between the new & current pets to establish a group scent, using a gate or screen to separate them, giving both treats while interacting to **build positive associations**
- Always monitor for signs of discomfort (**moving away, flashing the tail, flattening the ears**)

Litter Box(es)

- Location of a litter box should be **within the kitten's "core area"** but not high-traffic or noisy areas
- Low-sided for **easy entry, open & filled with fine-grained litter** are best for kittens
- As a general rule of thumb: the # of litter boxes should equal the # of cat social groups **plus one**
- Larger litter boxes (1.5x the cat's length) that are kept clean by **scooping daily** are preferred

Play & Posts

- Social play: with **owners & other pets**, increases between 4-11 weeks of age, then declines
- Solitary play: with **toys**, peaks at 16 weeks of age, then declines slowly (adults do continue play)
- Appropriate play can be encouraged with toys & wands, but **never fingers and toes**
- Monitor for problem play (**stalking, pouncing, biting**) which most often occurs in single kitten homes & ensure it is not encouraged
- Scratching posts can be placed near where kittens sleep or a couch or chair if they've "chosen" that surface as their preferred scratching surface; **consider using catnip or silvervine** to increase the attractiveness of the scratching post

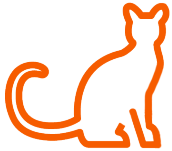
Sleep & Rest

- Kittens are **active during the day with peaks at dawn & dusk**, and tend to sleep in shorter bouts
- Providing safe spaces for rest (**perches, beds, cardboard boxes**) can prevent kittens from finding unsafe "safe" places
- Safe resting places should be **in the kitten's "core area"** away from high-traffic or noisy areas

Handling

- Start nail trims when kittens are young, keeping them positive, to **create a low-stress routine**
- Pair nail trims with food or treats, **avoid the quick of the nail** & monitor for if they need a break
- Nails should be cut about every 2 weeks - a short interval makes it a routine vs a big event
- Carriers can be left out in low-traffic, comfortable areas with a blanket, bed, or treats nearby to **encourage exploration and positive associations** for the kitten
- At the kitten's pace, gradually move through the carrier process: shut and open the door immediately, then shut the door and pick the carrier up, then moved, then a ride, etc.

Decoding Behavior: Adult & Senior Cats



Guide your cat through their adulthood and elder years! Behaviors can shift over your cat's lifespan and keeping track of any key changes can help you & your veterinarian institute early treatment as needed.

Boredom & Frustration

- A healthy indoor cat environment is important to avoiding boredom & frustration
- Enrich their space with: **scratching posts, safe play & resting areas, vertical space** for climbing
- Their environment should emphasize the importance of smell as well as promote **positive social interactions** that include opportunities for play

Aggression

- Cats are **generally conflict averse**, they will use scent marking & detection to manage their space (including vertical space to “get away” when needed) to avoid aggression
- Aggression as a defense can start subtly as: **tail swishing, ear flattening & blocking the “path”** around them, but can progress to include: **hissing, growling, swatting, and even biting**
- Ensure all cats have a refuge: their own space that contains the resources they need
- If there has been a fight between cats in the household, they should be separated for at least **48 hours before resuming supervised reintroductions**
- Always be proactive about talking with your veterinarian if you are noticing potential signs of conflict between cats in the home
- If your cat has had one or more negative experiences during a veterinary visit, be proactive about **requesting & using a pre-visit medication to make the visit as easy as possible**

Cognitive Dysfunction

- The most common sign of cognitive dysfunction is **nighttime vocalization** (granted this can be associated with other health changes)
- Other signs include: changes in social interaction, house soiling, disorientation, increased anxiety, sleep-wake cycle changes, increased or decreased activity
- **Annually quantify any signs of cognitive dysfunction** to better track your cat's need for early intervention as this may slow progression of signs
- Early intervention involves mental & physical stimulation: **play, food puzzles, & social interaction**

Chronic Pain

- Chronic pain associated with osteoarthritis & degenerative joint disease begins in cats as early as 2 years old, progressing as cats age
- Behavioral changes often noted include **changes in how cats move**: going up & down the stairs, playing, jumping up & down, running, etc.
- Going up & down stairs: they may lead with one particular limb each time, take stairs one at a time, bunny hop, stay near the wall, or pause midway
- Playing: they may play less, or **play with shorter bouts and fewer jumps**
- Jumping up: they may hesitate, take shorter or smaller jumps, **not “clear” the jump completely**
- Jumping down: they may take smaller jumps, reach straight down before trying to jump
- Running: they **may not run at all**, or if they do, transition quickly to a walk
- Other possible changes (changes in social interaction, house soiling, anxiety, sleep changes) can overlap with conditions like cognitive dysfunction so **it is important to treat any pain noted**
- Taking **annual video clips of your cat performing these movements at home** can help you & your veterinarian better monitor for signs of pain as your cat ages
- Cats should be provided with: **sleeping areas they can access** (add stairs or steps if elevated), easy to access/enter large litter boxes, extra grooming for “hard to reach” areas, but be cautious of a **possible lower tolerance of handling** and go slowly or talk to your veterinarian if you need help