

Advice sheets for kitten owners

If you do not have a kitten at the moment but are thinking about getting one, we suggest you do not do so at this present time. There are significant restrictions on the ability to follow best practice regarding rearing of young kittens at the present time and it would be better to wait until the current COVID-19 situation is resolved and social distancing measures are no longer necessary.

If you have recently welcomed a kitten into your household, then you may be worried about the impact of the restrictions related to the COVID-19 outbreak on your kitten's development and well-being. These guidelines are intended to help you and offer advice at this challenging time.

Physical health considerations

There are necessary alterations in availability of routine veterinary services, including vaccination and neutering, at this time and it is very important that you contact your GP veterinary practice to discuss what is available in terms of caring for your kitten's physical health. Please **do not go to the practice premises** without speaking to the practice first as they must operate within the government guidance on social distancing and only essential contact.

Physical needs of your kitten

As a result of the necessary changes and resulting restrictions on vaccination and neutering, you may find that you are keeping your kitten as an indoor cat at the moment when it had been your intention for them to live an indoor-outdoor lifestyle. This gives you extra responsibility to ensure that the indoor environment is meeting the environmental needs of your kitten and compensating as much as possible for the lack of experiences that would normally be provided by the outside world.

Emotional needs of your kitten

The first few months of your kitten's life are very important in terms of their behavioural and emotional development. Socialisation and habituation are important developmental processes at this time. They enable your kitten to accept the people, animals, objects and experiences in their environment as normal and above all to be happy and relaxed around them.

Learning about the environment

There are a number of ways in which appropriate exposure to the physical domestic environment can be provided within the household. For example, your kitten can see and hear the vacuum cleaner, lawnmower, hairdryer and other household appliances and can be given a range of different toys to introduce it to novel movement and textures and sounds. The most important thing is that your kitten is always happy and relaxed when these things are introduced and is not overwhelmed by them.

If your kitten has not been vaccinated or neutered during the COVID-19 situation they may not have the possibility of gaining access to locations outside the home. Nonetheless there are still ways in which the external physical environment can be brought to your kitten. For example, sound files can be freely downloaded and used (e.g. Sounds Sociable and Sounds Soothing from the Dogs Trust Website (<https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/help-advice/dog-behaviour-health/sound-therapy-for-pets>)). Please do not be put off by the fact that the files are on the Dogs Trust site! Sounds Sociable and Sounds Soothing are also relevant for your kitten. Sounds Sociable consists of a large number of different sounds in the outside world. Not all of them are appropriate for kittens so please read the accompanying booklet carefully and select the appropriate tracks. PLEASE NOTE THAT THE TRAFFIC RELATED SOUNDS SHOULD NOT BE USED FOR KITTENS, as you want them to remain wary of traffic. The accompanying booklet does have more advice regarding puppies than kittens but the instructions as to how

to use the sound files applies equally when using the product for kittens. If you live in a household with babies and small children it is very important for your kitten to learn that the noises that they make are also normal. The Sounds Soothing files can be used to introduce child related noises in a way that encourages your kitten to be happy and relaxed in their presence.

Under the current restrictions it is not possible to take your kitten out for trips in the car for the purposes of habituation but you can still get your kitten used to the car while it remains stationary on the driveway or outside your home. It is also important to start the process of getting your kitten used to the cat carrier in order to prepare them for the time when they will need to go on a journey, for example to the vet practice or cattery. Put the cat carrier out in the home with a comfortable blanket inside. If the lid is removable then take this off so that the bottom of the carrier is acting like a cat bed. The idea is for your kitten to view the carrier as a safe resting place. You can enhance the perception of it as a safe place by pre-treating the blanket with Feliway Classic® spray before putting it in the carrier. It is very important that you never use this spray when your kitten is present as the hiss and scent of the carrier liquid may upset them. Once your kitten is happy to explore the carrier you can begin using trails of food to encourage your kitten to walk into it, firstly without the lid and eventually with it in place. The next stage is to get your kitten used to being in the carrier when the door is closed. It can be useful to put a scatter of food treats or a mat smeared with food inside the carry so that the door can be closed while your kitten is engaged in the pleasant activity of eating the food. Initially you can open the door just before your kitten finishes the food and then gradually extend the time between finishing the food and the door being opened. Take it slowly and always work at your kitten's pace. Once your kitten is comfortable when enclosed in the carrier you can carry the carrier around the house very briefly before putting it down and letting your kitten out. Finally you are ready to put your kitten, inside the carrier, into the car. You can do this regularly while the car is stationary at your home and practise turning on the engine. As always it is important that your kitten is happy and relaxed during this experience and you can help to achieve this by placing a few small food treats or a mat smeared with a small amount of food into the carrier with your kitten.

Providing appropriate experiences while staying at home

The most significant restriction for kittens during this COVID-19 situation is in terms of the limited number of different people that they can encounter. It is very important to follow government advice and therefore your kitten will only be able to directly interact with yourself and members of your immediate household. This is not ideal but you can provide a wider experience for your kitten. You can alter your physical appearance and that of your household members by using glasses, hats, different clothes, walking sticks etc. You will still smell and sound the same so this is only a limited exposure to human variation but it is a start. Remember the most important thing is that your kitten is happy and relaxed when encountering you in these different disguises. If your kitten is overwhelmed or appears worried at any stage you should remove the disguise immediately.

Other ways in which you can help to ensure appropriate emotional development for your kitten during the COVID-19 situation include:

1. Get your kitten used to novelty – you can get your kitten used to different items, surfaces, sounds etc at home. Make sure that anything new is introduced gradually and ensure that your kitten is happy and relaxed at all times. If your kitten is overwhelmed or appears worried at any stage you should stop.
2. Get your kitten used to handling – you can still create a positive association with handling whilst you are at home, in fact you may have even more time for this than before! Cats are independent animals and it is important that they are introduced to the touching that humans like to engage in. Picking cats up and cuddling them is not something that they naturally find pleasant so introducing these forms of handling in very gradual steps when they are very young is beneficial. Likewise, human handling

for the purposes of grooming and checking the coat for medical reasons can be a challenge for some cats. Start off with really gentle stroking, and build up to brushing etc. followed by a treat. You can also introduce health handling in the same way, such as tooth brushing, looking at eyes and ears, opening the mouth and examining feet. Even though you are at home and may have more time please remember that handling should be done in short frequent sessions and not for long durations. It is also important not to be too intense and to stop if your kitten shows any signs of being overwhelmed or worried. The most important thing is that your kitten is always happy and relaxed.

Establishing a good relationship with your kitten

The early months of life are crucial in establishing a good relationship between you and your kitten. Learning about normal cat behaviour and communication is very important as well as finding out about the specific things that cats need in order to be emotionally, as well as physically, healthy.

Cats need predictable and consistent human interactions. Some of the challenges in terms of introducing your kitten to handling have been mentioned above. At this time when more people are in the house and they are likely to be in closer proximity to the kitten for longer durations it is important to remember that cats appreciate their own space! Many cats have been practising social distancing for a long time! Remember that speaking to your kitten will often be more appreciated than touching them and when children are at home during this COVID-19 situation it is important to pay particular attention to their interactions with the kitten. Very gentle handling is needed and any grabbing at or pulling on the kitten must be avoided. Cats do not deal well with rapid or unpredictable movements and it is helpful to ensure that people are calm, quiet and slow and smooth in their movements around your kitten.

Your kitten will need the opportunity to display play and predatory behaviour - playing with objects is very important for kittens and you should provide sufficient appropriate toys to ensure that your kitten does not start to play with inappropriate or unacceptable items in your home. Toys should enable your kitten to rehearse predation style behaviours such as stalking, pouncing, batting and carrying of items. Cats do not benefit from rough or teasing physical play with people so concentrate on playing with your kitten using toys and do not be tempted to use your fingers or toes to get a reaction from them.

Ensuring that your home meets feline environmental needs

In addition to ensuring that human interactions with your kitten are predictable and consistent it is also important to ensure that the home provides the following important things for your kitten:

1. A safe and secure place to rest – cats need the opportunity to spend time alone in a place where they will not be disturbed by people or other animals. They like to have access to high up locations and to feel protected when they are resting. Beds with raised sides, tunnels or boxes can all provide this sense of security. If you have dog, you may find it helpful to provide a baby gate that your kitten can pass over or through, so that they will be able to avoid any unwanted attention from the dog and feel secure. A baby gate is also useful to make sure that the dog does not disturb the kitten when it is using the litter facilities or trying to eat or drink.
2. An environment that respects the cat's important sense of smell - humans do not rely very much on their sense of smell in terms of feeling safe and secure within their home but cats do. It is important to avoid intense smells which your kitten may find unpleasant, such as citrus scents, alcohol smells and bleaches. It can also be helpful to provide signals which your kitten will find comforting and reassuring. Pheromones are signals that cats use to communicate with one another and with themselves and

there are products on the market that can be used to increase this form of communication within your home. Ask your veterinary practice for advice about these.

3. Easy access to all essential things they need to survive, such as food, water, litter facilities. It is important that these are each provided in a separate location and that those locations are quiet and undisturbed. More advice about how to distribute these resources for your kitten within your home is available from your veterinary practice.

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