



Bringing home a kitten is an exciting time and appropriate socialization helps reduce behavioural issues in the future. Here are some tips for helping your new feline friend settle in and become a sociable adult cat!

Sensitive Period

Kittens undergo a sensitive or development period between 2-7 weeks of age. During this time, kittens learn about their environment, develop important memories, and socialization with people is critical. Research has shown that kittens who are handled positively by at least 4-5 different people during this time are likely to be more sociable as adults, versus being handled by only one person. It is important to understand that socialization is not only about exposure to different individuals but also positive interactions.

Kittens who are not socialized during this period can become fearful of people, avoiding contact and displaying defensive aggression when approached or touched. This makes it more difficult to provide for their essential needs, such as when they need to be groomed, transported, or handled for a veterinary exam.

Even if you don't get the opportunity to handle your kitten before 7 weeks of age, socialization can still benefit kittens up to 14 weeks of age.

Kitten Bingo

See the [Fear Free Kitten Socialization Bingo](#) handout. This handout provides fun ideas for ensuring your kitten is exposed to different experiences during their sensitive period!

Fear

Depending on your kitten's age and previous experience with people, you may need to slowly introduce them to being approached and handled. Pay attention to your kitten's body language and go at their pace.

Watch for signs of fear, stress, or anxiety. Some common signs of fear in kittens includes:

- Hiding or avoidance
- Vocalizations (growling, hissing)
- Flattened or rotated ears
- Stiffened or "frozen" posture
- Arching the back
- Raised fur
- Swatting or scratching
- Widened eyes



If you observe any of these behaviours, stop the interaction, give your kitten some time and some space to relax. Forcing a kitten to interact with you can lead to a bite or your kitten having a negative experience, which will decrease their willingness to interact with you (or other people) in future.

Fearful or Unsocialized Kittens

If you have a kitten who is fearful of people or has minimal socialization, you will need to start slow.

Consider setting up an enclosed space in a quiet area; for example, you can set-up a large dog crate lined with towels at the bottom for comfort, or use a small bathroom - ensuring that the toilet seat is down and the shower curtain is removed. Place your kitten's essentials in the enclosed space, including a litter box, hiding box, food and water dishes, and a scratching post or surface. Ensure their food and water dishes are not placed right beside their litterbox. Housing your kitten this way ensures that they don't get into any hazards in your home, and also allows you to facilitate a gradual and positive introduction.

Note: If you use a dog crate, make sure the holes in the crate are not large enough for your kitten to crawl through and potentially become injured.

Tips For Socializing Fearful or Undersocialized Kittens

(Adapted from the Toronto Humane Society's ['Socializing Kittens Over 8 Weeks Old'](#) resource)

1. For the first day or two, sit quietly outside the crate for 15-20 minutes. Encourage your kitten to approach you by speaking in a calm, pleasant tone. Wait until your kitten is comfortable with your presence outside the crate before attempting to open the crate door.
2. Open the crate door (while still sitting outside the crate) and grab their food dish. Put some food inside the dish and place the dish close to your kitten. Wait several minutes for them to approach and/or eat the food.
 - o **Note:** If your kitten doesn't approach or eat the food, remove the dish and try again later. If they still don't eat the food when you try a second time, go back to closing the door and just sitting outside the crate in step 1.
3. If your kitten eats food from the dish, start to place the dish closer to you each time you offer food. After a few sessions, your kitten should eventually become comfortable eating food out of the dish right in front of you or even in your lap. You can also try putting some wet food on your finger and offering it to your kitten.
4. Once your kitten is comfortable eating right beside you and/or is licking wet food from your finger, you can begin to initiate some physical touch. Try gently stroking their head or shoulder area for a few seconds at a time. Start petting them after they have started to eat and stop before they have finished eating. Stroking your kitten while they are eating helps to associate touch with food, which is a positive experience.



5. After a few sessions, you can begin to initiate physical touch outside of eating time. For example, extend out your hand in the crate and see if your kitten will rub up against your hand or sniff you.
 - **Note:** Do not force them to be touched. If they don't initiate an interaction, that's ok - simply try again later.
6. Once they are comfortable with their head and shoulder area being petted, and they are initiating some physical touch outside of eating time, start to gradually move your hand under their belly, while they are eating. This will help prepare your kitten for being picked up, eventually.
7. If your kitten tolerates having their belly touched, then you can start to gently lift them up. Before you do this, add some extra tasty treats to their food dish. Once they start to eat, place your hand underneath their chest and gently lift your kitten with one hand – lift up their food dish with your other hand at the same time. This allows your kitten to keep eating while being picked up. Only lift them up a very short distance for a few seconds. Then put them back down and allow them to continue eating.
8. Over a few sessions, gradually increase how far and how long you pick them up. Eventually, you should be able to pick up your kitten outside of eating – this is best tried after your kitten has just finished eating and are feeling full and content. Continue to gently stroke their head or shoulder area right before you pick them up.
 - **Note:** Always monitor their behaviour before you pick up your kitten – if they are showing any signs of fear, do not pick them up. Try again later.
9. Once your kitten is comfortable being picked up inside their crate or enclosed area, you can introduce them to your household. Remove any hazards in your home, and place their essentials (food and water dishes, litter box, hiding space) in areas that are easily accessible to them. Try to keep activity in your home limited for your kitten to adjust to their new environment.
 - **Note:** Offer treats whenever you initiate physical touch (e.g. petting or being picked up) to reinforce to your kitten that physical touch is a positive experience. Over time, your kitten should become more comfortable with your home and interacting with you and any household members!

Environment and Enrichment

It's important for kittens to feel safe in their environment. When comfortable, they are more likely to explore, play, sleep or rest, and interact with people. Below are some ways you can help your kitten relax and promote positive behaviours:



- When kittens feel stressed, their natural response is to retreat or hide. Therefore, it's important we provide your kitten with a "safe" space, such as a hiding box, elevated perch, feline fort, cat tunnel, or carrier. They should be able to easily enter and exit without being disturbed.
- Kittens like to explore and rest on elevated places. This allows them to monitor their environment, which is a great form of enrichment. Consider building perches for your kitten, or have a scratching post with multiple levels.
- Ensure your kitten has access to a scratching post. Scratching is an essential behaviour for felines. Most prefer a vertical scratching post (at least 3 ft in height) made with rope (sisal) with two or more levels and a base width between 1-3 ft. Each feline has individual preferences, so you may need to experiment with scratching posts made of different materials.
- Provide your kitten with suitable enrichment, such as toys (e.g. catnip toys, balls with bells, boxes, wand toys) and food puzzles. Consider rotating toys, offering new toys or items, and engaging your kitten in appropriate play or training sessions.
- Make sure your kitten has easy access to their food, water, hiding place, scratching post, and litter box. They might be deterred from accessing these items if there is too much activity in the household, or if they are encountering conflicts with other household cats. If you have multiple cats, offer several access points to food, water, and litter boxes to avoid inter-cat conflicts.

Reward-Based Training

You can also use reward-based training to help socialize your kitten! Read and download the [Reward-Based Training For Cats](#) resource from our website.

What to AVOID

In summary, here are some things to avoid when socializing kittens:

- Forcing your kitten to be held or handled. This can lead to a bite or them having a negative experience, which will decrease their willingness to interact with you (or other people) in future.
- Ignoring signs of fear. Pay attention to their body language. If you see subtle signs of fear, stop the interaction and give them time to relax. Try again later.
- Having a lot of activity in the household. Try to keep activity or distractions minimal when first settling in. This will help them become comfortable in the new environment and will encourage them to explore and interact with people.
- Not exposing your kitten to quickly to different sights, sounds, or other people. Ensure that your kitten always has a positive experience, especially when they are introduced to new things.

Did You Know?

You can also ask us behavioural questions by emailing:

askthespecialist@edmontonhumanesociety.com

It takes approximately \$7 million to keep the Edmonton Humane Society operational for one year and 40% of these funds come from generous donations made by supporters like you. Please [Donate](#).