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Why are kittens so cute? You asked Google – here's the answer

Dean Burnett



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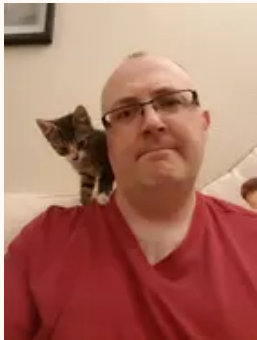
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📷 'Far from being a vulnerable, timid little ball of fur, Pickle seems to be an actual psychopath.'

A few months ago, my family and I went to a nearby cat rescue shelter to get a kitten. There were five in the available litter to choose from, but as we were watching them play, one of the two tabbies boldly decided to scale a nearby sack of bedding, then promptly fell in head-first and couldn't get out. Obviously, we had to have that idiot. And that's how we ended up with Pickle.



📷 Dean Burnett and Pickle

Named by my five-year-old son for [a character from Blaze and the Monster Machines](#), Pickle seemed to have no fear whatsoever, immediately taking to playing with the kids, being manhandled by my two-year-old daughter, and constantly attempting to sit on me while I'm working. But recently, after all his inoculations and "other" treatments, we had a cat flap installed so he could go outside. We were honestly worried about him. He's growing fine but is still quite slender; he's so young and small still, and there are a lot of other cats and dogs in our street. Would the little guy be able to cope?

You know in [The Dark Knight](#) when Gotham City's all happy because the criminal element has been tamed by Batman, then the Joker turns up and all hell breaks loose? It was a bit like that, but with a cat. In the first two weeks

of him being outside, Pickle had stared down and scared off every (bigger, older) cat he could find, started and actually won several fights with next door's (massive) dog, decided to use the neighbouring children's trampoline as a toilet, and I recently saw him chase what looked to be two genuinely afraid teenage boys down the street.

We also recently found a large tuna steak on our garden path. Still no idea where that came from.



📷 'Countless people ask Google, Why are kittens so cute?' Photograph: Melanie DeFazio/Stocksy United

So, far from being a vulnerable, timid little ball of fur, Pickle seems to be an actual psychopath. And possibly a master thief as well. Even by standard cat stereotypes, this is pushing it somewhat. Such characteristics do not scream “cute”. But... look at his face!

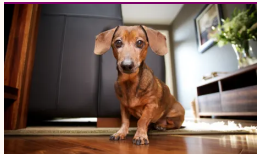
Yes, Pickle, a kitten, is still cute. All kittens are. But, why? Why are these miniature monsters, with their aloofness, numerous spiky bits, and tendency to murder things and bring you their mangled remains, so capable of triggering human empathy and adoration? They’re not even the same species as us! Countless people ask Google, “Why are kittens so cute?” every day, so it’s obviously a common question. Thankfully, science has provided a few answers and explanations.

earliest work into cuteness as a scientific phenomenon began with the term 'Kindchenschema'

instinctively seek out, even need, soft pleasant contact, preferably with our own parents and kin, but the basic tactile sensation will do usually. This may stem from an evolved like of social grooming, and extremely rewarding and influential practice among social mammals like us, so the very act of running your fingers through the long soft fur of another being is likely something we respond to at a deep, instinctive level, so

any animal which seems to be all soft fur is going to be instinctively more appealing. And kittens are exactly that. The Oatmeal's Matt Inman describes stroking a kitten's tummy as "like frolicking in the back hair of an angel", which sounds just right. This may also explain why scaly or slimy creatures don't get the cute label, but birds often get a pass, particularly the "fluffier" ones. Feathers are nice and soft too, after all.

It's not just the fur though, obviously. Rats and mice have fur, but we have industries dedicated to wiping them out. And tarantulas are technically furry, but...



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So what else is it about kittens that trigger this cute reflex? Much of the earliest work into cuteness as a scientific phenomenon began with Austrian scientist Konrad Lorenz who coined the term "Kindchenschema". As the name suggests, it basically proposes that the more qualities and features something has in common with human babies, the cuter it's perceived as being. For instance, babies have disproportionately large heads and eyes compared to their eventual adult form, thanks to the uneven ways the brain and body develop. Kittens (and puppies) also have large heads and huge eyes, so are considered cuter than the more evenly-proportioned beady-eyed rodents nature provides us with.

Younger animals generally provoke this cuteness reflex more, even if the adult version is still relatively small and fluffy. There are many theories as to where it comes from, or what it's for, but it's a particularly potent one that "hijacks" many neurological processes. Many argue that it stems from an evolved pressure to care for babies, as human ones are so vulnerable and need constant care, so it's good for the species. It can even go "too far",

where the cute reflex is powerful but regularly thwarted (due to species, distance, cultural limits on what's acceptable interaction etc), and [results in aggressive elements being invoked](#) ("So cute I could just squeeze it/eat it up!" and so on).

Kittens seem to trigger a lot of the inherent reflexes in our brains that we've acquired over the millennia of evolution. Their furry small bodies with the huge heads and eyes tick all the right boxes, so we find them so cute, we let them get away with murder. Literally.

- *Dean Burnett discusses this and similar matters in his new book [The Happy Brain](#), released 3 May*

In recent polls, American voters ranked "threats to democracy" among the most important issues facing the country. At a time of climate collapse, inflation and a pandemic, this speaks powerfully to the fragility of America's fundamental rights and freedoms.

The country is seeing a dizzying number of assaults on democracy, from draconian abortion bans to a record number of book bans. Politicians who spread lies and sought to delegitimize the 2020 election are pursuing offices that will put them in control of the country's election machinery. Meanwhile, the supreme court is enforcing its own agenda on abortion, guns and environmental protections - often in opposition to public opinion.

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