

Kitten Socialization and Training Classes

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It is now well accepted that puppies benefit from attending socialization and training classes. So if puppies can attend school, why not kittens? There are many positive outcomes when kittens and people attend kitten socialization classes, which were first developed in Australia as Kitten Kindy.¹³

The idea of training cats, let alone holding kitten socialization and training classes, is a foreign concept to most people.¹³ However, kitten classes can be just as successful and deliver many of the same benefits to owners, kittens, and the veterinary practice as puppy classes (Box 11-1). Kitten classes are designed to be an early socialization, training, and education program to help owners and kittens start off on the right track. Kitten classes aim to help prevent behavioral problems, as well as educate owners on all aspects of raising a kitten and then living with a cat in the family. The aim is also to establish a close bond among the cat, the owner, and the veterinary practice. It is yet another valuable service that veterinarians should offer their patients and clients.

Although the issue has not been formally studied, kitten classes are likely to save lives, insofar as some of the recognized potential risk factors for relinquishment could be addressed in well-run kitten classes. These risk factors include harboring unrealistic or inappropriate expectations about the cat's role in the household, allowing the cat outdoors, owning a sexually intact cat, and never having read a book about cat behavior; cats that eliminate inappropriately on a daily or weekly basis are also at risk.¹¹ The most frequent explanations for surrender are behavioral problems—problems that might have been prevented.^{9,10}

Most veterinary behaviorists now believe that kitten socialization classes (when properly taught) are beneficial,^{9,10,12} and kitten socialization classes are suggested in the American Association of Feline Practitioners Feline Behavior Guidelines.¹⁰

On average, cats visit the veterinarian less than half as often as dogs,⁷ yet cats outnumber dogs by approximately 20%.¹ Given that most socialization classes require a sign-off form from the veterinarian, enrollment in such a class ensures at least one veterinary visit and so establishes a relationship with a veterinarian.¹⁰

There are many reasons that cats may visit the veterinarian less often than dogs, and these range from the cat's fear of the carrier and the corresponding car ride to difficulties with handling the cat for even minor procedures. Kitten class instructors can address some of these issues in the class, as well as provide instructions regarding the best ways to desensitize kittens to carriers and car rides even before the first kitten class.

Dog trainers who teach puppy classes often remark that educating the owner is the most important aspect of the classes. Kitten classes are no different, offering an opportunity to educate clients about their kitten's behavior and set up realistic expectations of living with a cat in the household.

Getting to know a cat better might help when a cat is not feeling well. This is even more imperative with cats than dogs because cats often mask signs of illness. The more connected families are to their cats, the more likely they are to detect these subtle signs.

BOX 11-1**The Value of Kitten Socialization Classes**

- All kittens are examined before attending, which requires establishing a relationship with a veterinarian.
- Kittens are desensitized to the carrier.
- Kittens are habituated to travel.
- Kittens are habituated to unfamiliar people.
- Owners learn about proper care, which enhances cat health: nail clipping, brushing the coat, and brushing teeth.
- Owners who have a stronger bond with their cats may be more likely to note subtle signs of illness and visit the veterinarian proactively for wellness exams.
- Many behavioral problems can be prevented.
- The class provides a veterinary resource for behavior-related problems.
- The instructor can provide information on feline heartworm prevention and what to do to control fleas and ticks (where applicable).
- The class helps to dispel common myths about cats (e.g., cats are antisocial).
- Owners learn that they *can* exercise their cats and provide an interesting enriched life indoors. They also discover that cats can learn and be trained.
- The class boosts the confidence of kittens and owners alike, and the sessions are fun for kittens, owners, and instructors.

- Provide advice on how to modify unacceptable behavior, and refer to a veterinary behaviorist if necessary.
- Help owners to have realistic expectations for their pet.
- Help owners build a strong bond with the veterinary practice.
- Educate owners on all aspects of kitten development, pet care, and living with a cat in the family—fostering socially responsible pet ownership.

Recruitment and Promotion

Ideally, kittens are recruited at the time of their first vaccination or health examination. This visit should include provision of written material on kitten care and kitten classes. Because classes for kittens are a novelty, the local media are often interested in covering the story and thereby help advertise the classes. There are also some veterinarians who work in tandem with local shelters that support the concept of kitten classes. Working together with a shelter has benefits because it provides a partner to help promote the classes and also helps rehome kittens. However, the success of the program depends on the support of all personnel at the veterinary practice. Everyone needs to understand what the classes involve to recruit the kittens effectively.

Kittens

All kittens attending classes should be between 8 and 14 weeks of age and must have started their vaccination and worming program. Kittens should be no more than 14 weeks old when they complete the course to prevent potential fighting. The recommended minimum number of kittens for a class is three and the optimal maximum number is six, so that all kittens and their owners get suitable attention.

Attendees

The whole family, including children, should be encouraged to attend. If young children are attending, one adult must accompany each child so that they are adequately supervised. Owners of cats older than 14 weeks are encouraged to attend *without* their cat so that they too can benefit from the information provided.

Staff

So that the classes are functional and owners and kittens derive value from attending, at least two people should run each class. This allows for better observation of the kittens and more effective control of the class. At least one instructor should be well versed in normal feline behavior so that up-to-date advice regarding medical and behavioral matters can be given.

GETTING STARTED**Planning Classes**

For maximum benefit the classes should be held at a veterinary clinic so that the kittens and their owners can meet veterinarians and staff and become familiar with the practice. These classes should be planned carefully. The aim and outcome for running the classes should be considered in advance.

The classes should be fun and also provide a relaxed and safe environment for both pets and owners to learn. The objectives of kitten classes will differ with each veterinary practice, but the aim should be to accomplish the following:

- Inform owners about normal feline behavior.
- Allow kittens to socialize in a safe and controlled environment.
- Teach kittens to accept gentle handling from humans.
- Habituate kittens to a variety of stimuli so that they grow into manageable, easily handled adult cats.
- Identify problem behaviors, and provide possible solutions to common issues such as litter training, biting, and scratching.



FIGURE 11-1 Track-type toys have a ball inside a box or circular plastic cylinder and are popular with kittens.

Equipment

The following items can be used and demonstrated in kitten kindergarten class:

- Cat-safe collars, harnesses, and leashes
- Clickers (if the instructor wants to demonstrate their use)
- Several different types of scratching posts (vertical and horizontal)
- Empty cardboard boxes
- A range of toys:
 - Tunnels (e.g., air conditioning tubing, ready-made cat tunnels)
 - Track-type toys in which a ball is held inside a box or plastic track, allowing the kitten to bat at it; can be as simple as an empty tissue box with a ball inside ([Figure 11-1](#))
 - Balls
 - Kitten-safe toys on elastic or fishing poles
 - Homemade toys that children can make or paint
- Assortment of cat carriers: top opening, front opening, and so forth, so that the advantages and disadvantages of each can be explained
- Selection of litter boxes (e.g., covered, uncovered, liners) so that the advantages and disadvantages of each can be explained. (Standard litter boxes or inexpensive disposable cardboard litter boxes should always be available for kittens to use during class. These should be disposed of and replaced or disinfected after each class.)
- An indoor garden with samples of cat grass, catnip, and other kitten-safe greens so that the instructors can explain which plants are suitable and the potential hazards of certain toxic house plants



FIGURE 11-2 A kitten class held at a veterinary clinic allows kittens to become accustomed to veterinary visits; relaxed behavior should be rewarded with praise and treats.

Although all participants enjoy watching kittens interact with one another, the class should not resemble a playground setting. Too much kitten play may be overstimulating and ultimately not enjoyable for the kittens. Additionally, because people are easily distracted by the antics of playing kittens, they may not listen to the instructors.

Location

As previously mentioned, the veterinary clinic is the ideal location for the classes because the aim is to familiarize the kitten and the owner with the practice and its staff ([Figure 11-2](#)). Although other locations allow kittens to socialize and owners to be educated about cats, these places do not allow optimal familiarization with the veterinary practice or its staff.

The space should be of appropriate size: Too large a space offers kittens too much freedom; too small a space may not allow for adequate spacing between chairs for people to sit comfortably, and if the kittens themselves are too crowded, that may also lead to problems. A safe, secure environment with closed doors is imperative so that kittens cannot escape. A diffuser with a synthetic analog of a feline facial pheromone (e.g., Feliway; Ceva) should be plugged in to help reduce potential anxiety and enhance comfort.

TEACHING KITTENS

Kittens are not small puppies. Although the basic principles of training are the same as those for puppies or any other animal (i.e., rewarding appropriate and acceptable behaviors), the classes cannot be conducted in the same way as puppy socialization and training classes. Cat communication and body language are very

different, and the socialization period ends much earlier than that of dogs. As the kittens are interacting, the instructors can point out and discuss the differences in signaling and body language between cats and dogs.

When teaching any exercise, instructors must be very patient, remain consistent, and keep each training session short. Just 5 minutes of teaching at any one time is sufficiently long because a kitten's concentration span is short. Training should occur when the kitten is most responsive (e.g., just before a meal).

Rewards

Small tasty treats such as dehydrated liver, barbecue chicken, cheese, minced meat, or Vegemite work well. Food rewards should be varied because some kittens are very timid and may not be used to eating from the hand. The food rewards should also be very small so that the kitten does not become satiated early in class and lose interest in the treat.

Some kittens respond more to toys and games, so these also work well as rewards.

Verbal and visual cues can be taught in each class. For example, cats can be taught to come, walk on a lead, sit, and even perform tricks such as "Give me five." However, the main aim is to help owners understand their cats, prevent problem behaviors from developing, and recognize behavioral problems (behavioral illness or pathology) so that appropriate intervention and management programs can be recommended and kittens referred to a veterinary behaviorist if necessary.

It is always important to offer encouragement to owners about their kitten's progress, even if this progress is not apparent in class. Instructors should explain that there are many distractions in class that make learning more difficult and that all exercises should be repeated in different places at varying times so the kitten can learn them.

Punishment

Punishment should not be used when teaching a new behavior in any species. Punishment does not teach the kitten what behavior is expected and can lead to fear and a breakdown in the bond between the cat and the owner.

CLASS STRUCTURE

Because there is so much room for variation, each practice should decide what structure works best for each class. Ideally, kitten classes are run for 1 hour each week, and the course is conducted over 2 to 3 weeks. One option is to have owners attend the first class without their kittens so that they can listen without being distracted by the kittens.

Ideally, each 1-hour class is scheduled for 2 consecutive weeks (for example, 2 consecutive Tuesday nights). However, other options include two 1-hour classes on 2 consecutive days (e.g., a Tuesday evening and again on the next day, Wednesday, same time, same place). Another option, which might work for some practices, is a one-time 90-minute class, although this does not allow for any follow-up, except over the phone.

Topics to Cover

Litter Training

Inappropriate elimination is, according to some data, the most frequently given reason for relinquishment.¹¹ One newspaper column² on pet behavior reported that over a period of 15 years, feline inappropriate elimination was by far the most common topic for questions (followed by canine aggression).

Many owners need to be taught about litter box care: how often to change litter boxes, how to clean them, how many are needed, and where to place them. The following is a summary that can be covered in class:

- One litter box per kitten (cat) plus one extra is a good rule of thumb.
- Litter boxes should be at least 1½ times the length of the cat, so bigger ones may be needed as the kitten grows.
- Litter boxes should be placed in readily accessible locations. For example, a litter box in a downstairs bathroom is not convenient for a kitten that spends most of the day upstairs.
- Litter boxes should be cleaned at least once daily.
- Offer a selection of different litters (e.g., clumping litter, sand, sawdust, recycled paper) to find the one that the kitten prefers.
- Schedule feeding times (this makes elimination times more predictable).
- Place litter boxes in a low-traffic zone, one that provides privacy. If the kitten is frightened while in the litter box, it may be discouraged from using the box. For example, if the kitten is cornered by a dog or an older cat or the washing machine jumps into full spin cycle just as the kitten is using the litter box, the kitten is unlikely to want to go back there to toilet.

Handling

Cats that are handled frequently at a younger age benefit physically and emotionally, showing less fear and greater confidence and friendliness as adults.⁵ It has been shown that socialized cats that were handled between 2 and 12 weeks of age were at 1 year of age quicker to approach, touch, and rub familiar and unfamiliar test persons; this is likely to increase the bond between owner and cat.^{7a} Owners should be taught how to handle kittens. Instructors should demonstrate how

to hold kittens, clip nails, and medicate, using rewards for good behavior. They should also show owners how to groom and brush the kitten and discuss bathing when necessary.

If the class is being conducted at a veterinary clinic, instructors should take one kitten at a time to be handled on an examination table, rewarding relaxed behavior with quiet praise and tasty treats. The instructor should wear a laboratory coat or usual staff uniform for this exercise to make it seem as much like a real veterinary visit as possible. External parasite control, heartworm prevention, nutrition, and dental care can be discussed in these sessions.

Scratching

Scratching furniture is a common complaint of many cat owners. The importance of scratching as a means of communication should be explained, as well as advising on suitable placement of scratching posts, appropriate material for cats to scratch, and a discussion of what to do if kittens have begun to scratch inappropriately.

More information about enriched environments for indoor cats is found in Chapter 46.

SAMPLE CURRICULUM

The following is a sample kitten class curriculum. The order and topics discussed may vary in each practice according to regional differences in the incidence of disease and individual preferences.^{4,10,12,13} Questions from owners are always encouraged. Information sheets should be handed out that repeat the advice given in each of the lessons. Additional resources are listed in Box 11-2.

BOX 11-2

Additional Resources

1. Seksel K: Kitten Kindy video, Melbourne, 1998, Malcolm Hunt Productions; available by contacting sabs@sabs.com.au.
2. Seksel K: *Training your cat*, Victoria, Australia, 2001, Hyland House Publishing.
3. Kitty-K: A kitten's mind is a terrible thing to waste: <http://www.stevedalepetworld.com/kitty-k>. Last accessed March, 28, 2011.
4. Pryor K: *Getting started: clicker training for cats*, Waltham, Mass, 2003, Sunshine Books.
5. Yin S: *Low stress handling, restraint and behavior modification of dogs and cats*, Davis, Calif, 2009, Cattle Dog Publishing.
6. Rodan I, Sundahl E, Carney H, et al: AAFP and ISFM feline-friendly handling guidelines, *J Feline Med Surg* 13:364, 2011.

Week One

1. Registration: Check vaccination certificates, and perform a brief examination for any signs of illness such as weepy eyes or runny noses.
2. Welcome:
 - Ask all the owners to be seated. All kittens should still be in their carriers, because people tend to pay more attention while the kittens are confined.
 - Introduce the instructors, and ask the owners to introduce themselves and their kittens.
 - Set out house rules, and outline the course objectives and content. Introductory remarks should explain why kitten classes are important. Congratulate clients for caring enough about their kittens to attend.
 - Stress that class attendees should follow up with their veterinarian as a future resource for any future behavior issue, and proactively visit the veterinarian for exams twice a year, even if cats appear healthy.
3. Interaction:
 - Various kitten toys and scratchers are strewn randomly throughout the play zone (Figure 11-3).
 - Release kittens one by one from their carrier to interact, but if the group is large, not all should be out of the carriers at the same time (Figure 11-4).
 - Some kittens may feel more comfortable sitting on their owner's laps. It is important not to force kittens to interact; no hissing should occur.
 - Kittens should be left to investigate their surroundings for 15 minutes while various topics are discussed. It is important to observe the kittens' behavior carefully and intervene to prevent kittens from being frightened or bullied.



FIGURE 11-3 Various types of toys should be provided in a play zone for kitten classes.



FIGURE 11-4 During kitten classes kittens can be released from their carriers to interact with one another, but careful supervision is required.

- Discuss each of the toys, and show owners how to interact and play with their kittens appropriately.
 - Explain various aspects of feline communication. Owners love to learn why their cat is behaving the way it is.
 - Allow time for owners to ask questions. Children attending the class should be taught to play appropriately with kittens.
4. Training:
- There are limitations as to what people can do with their cats (although there are now agility competitions for cats), but training a cat is widely assumed to lead to a stronger bond with the family.^{9,10} A cohesive bond is also important if a behavioral problem, such as elimination in unacceptable places, or an illness occurs. More cats than dogs are surrendered to shelters by owners.⁸ It is possible that by becoming more tightly connected with the owner through training and “teamwork,” the cat is more likely to be treated rather than surrendered.
 - Many owners seem genuinely surprised that cats can be trained in the first place. People smile when an instructor demonstrates how a cat can be clicker trained to sit within a minute. The instructor offers an explanation of operant conditioning.
 - Training offers cats both mental and physical exercise. Attendees can be taught to clicker train their cats to do something, such as to sit on cue.
 - Teaching the cat to come: Teaching kittens to come on cue is generally not difficult. The kitten should always be rewarded for coming in response to its name and the word “come.” It helps if the kitten is hungry, interested in the



FIGURE 11-5 Owners should be taught how to hold and gently handle the kitten, as well as massage and relaxation techniques.

- treats, and willing to eat from a hand. Demonstrate by offering the kitten a treat, and slowly back up a few paces. Call the kitten’s name, and say “Come” as it is walking toward you. Reward the kitten immediately. Repeat this exercise a few times. Then, one at a time, the class participants should practice with their own kittens. Encourage owners to do this exercise at home before every meal, when there are fewer distractions.
- Handling exercises: Spend a few minutes showing owners how to hold and gently handle their kitten. Discuss how to gently massage the kitten to relax it (Figure 11-5). The instructor might also demonstrate how to clip nails and how to medicate using rewards for relaxed behavior. Demonstrate how to groom, brush, and, if necessary, bathe the kitten. This discussion might include topics such as flea control, nutrition, and dental care. Encourage owners to check their kitten’s mouth and teeth daily. The importance of dental hygiene and toothbrushing (using pet toothbrushes, finger brushes, and pet toothpastes) could also be discussed.
5. Discussion topics:
- Indoor cats and environmental enrichment: Some people still believe that keeping cats inside is cruel. It is important to explain that because indoor cats do not get lost, do not get run over, and do not get into cat fights, they are generally



FIGURE 11-6 Cats can be trained from a young age to accept a harness and leash as a way to provide exercise and stimulation out of doors in a safe manner.

healthier. Indoor cats rely on their owners to provide them with a physically and mentally stimulating environment. A demonstration of how to leash and harness train kittens can be followed by ideas on how to allow cats outside safely (e.g., using cat strollers and cat fencing) (Figure 11-6).

- Modifying unwanted normal behaviors: Unwanted behaviors may include scratching furniture or jumping onto counters. It is always better to teach the kitten desirable behaviors rather than punish undesirable ones. Scratching is another way that cats communicate. They leave a visual and scent marker when they scratch. Appropriate and correctly placed scratching posts will help prevent damage to furniture.
 - Owners are often concerned about their cat's predatory instincts, but not all cats hunt. Some cats do like to stalk and pounce, so owners can be taught appropriate ways to manage the behavior, such as interactive games that allow the kitten to exercise. A cord or string tied around the owner's waist, with a toy on the other end trailing along the floor, allows owners to divert the cat from an owner's ankles or feet.
6. Conclusion: Hand out information sheets that reinforce the advice given in the lessons. Encourage owners to ask questions.

Week Two

1. Welcome: Greet owners, and answer any questions that may have arisen since the previous week. Kittens are given another brief physical examination. Outline the lesson plan for this class.
2. Interaction: Kittens are allowed out of the carriers so that they can explore the room and interact with one

another if they are amenable. Kittens often appear more confident on their second visit.

3. Review: "Come" and handling exercises are reviewed. Ask owners to demonstrate one at a time with their own kittens. Remember that this is a strange environment for young kittens because there are many distractions and smells. Therefore some kittens may find it difficult to concentrate, and fear may override the desire to eat a treat, let alone come when called. Encourage the owner to practice at home.
4. Discussion: Other topics that can be covered this week include the following:
 - Routine health care: The importance of spay/neuter, vaccination, and deworming can be discussed. The importance of identification (i.e., microchips and collars with tags) should also be discussed during this time. Local legislation regarding licensing/registration, curfews, and so forth should also be discussed.⁶ Grooming, bathing, and flea and tick control should be discussed, if they were not covered the first week.
 - Feline behavior: Feline social systems, communication, and the importance of a predictable routine should be reviewed. Advise owners to have regular times to feed, groom, and play with their kitten. Daily play sessions are important for young kittens to use up energy and promote a strong bond with the owner.
5. Training:
 - "Sit": Call the kitten to come, and offer it a treat. Hold the treat directly above the kitten's nose and then slowly direct your hand back over the kitten's head toward its rear end. As the head goes up and backward, the rear is lowered to the ground. The kitten is rewarded as soon as its bottom hits the ground. Repeat this a few times. Once the kitten is sitting consistently, start saying the word "sit" as the action and the word are paired together (Figure 11-7).
 - "Give me five": This is a fun exercise that is similar to teaching a dog to shake hands. Kittens naturally lift their paws in response to food being offered, so this behavior can be slowly shaped into "Give me five" or "Give me ten" in response to the verbal cue.
 - Walking on a lead: The kitten should be habituated to wearing a collar or harness. Once the kitten has become used to the collar or the harness, allow the kitten to drag the leash around so that the kitten gets used to the weight of the collar or the harness and the clip on the leash. Encourage the kitten to walk and follow by using treats or wiggling a toy in front of the kitten as you walk along.
6. Common behavior concerns: Any behavior that owners find unacceptable should be addressed now,



FIGURE 11-7 Kittens and cats can be taught to sit by holding a treat directly above the kitten's nose, encouraging the head to go up and the rear end to go down.

as cats do not “grow out of it.” Methods of modifying or managing unacceptable behaviors should be discussed and the owners should be made aware of normal behaviors so that they have realistic expectations of their cat.

7. Graduation: Kitten classes come to an end with a small ceremony. Every owner receives a certificate of attendance, some samples of products, and a list of resources. Final questions and comments are answered. Owners should be advised that they can always come back to the clinic or consult the instructor if problems occur in the future. If a problem is too complicated and requires expert

help, they should be referred to a qualified applied animal behaviorist or veterinary behaviorist.

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