



20 *Understanding Your New Kitten*



24 *The Early Threat of Canine Parvovirus*



26 *Deworming*



29 *Basic Training for the Perfect Dog*



33 *Life with Dogs and Children*



37 *Bringing Home a Puppy or Kitten*



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Understanding Your New KITTEN

By Dr. Susan Little

There are few things more exciting in a pet owner's life than bringing home a new kitten. However, beyond the initial excitement, taking on this pet means committing 10 to 15 years of care—or more. It pays to put some thought into addressing the needs of this new resident in your home. Your kitten will require some time and patience to adjust to its new home, just as you will need to adjust to this new addition.

If you have other pets, be sure to introduce them gradually. Young children should be supervised when playing with kittens and taught to handle them with care and respect.



Basic needs

All kittens need certain basic resources, such as the provision of food and water. Your new kitten should have its own food and water bowls, placed in a quiet area. Be sure they are not accessible to dogs or other animals.

Your veterinarian can recommend a good kitten diet. Fresh water should be available at all times. Be sure to clean all food and water bowls thoroughly on a regular basis.

A litter box is the next priority. It should be provided in a quiet but accessible location. Make sure it is not too tall for the kitten to climb into.

There are many different litters available on the market (see *PETS Magazine*, March/April 2005, pp. 8-10), but cats generally prefer very fine-grained materials. Waste will have to be scooped out daily and the box completely emptied, disinfected and refilled with fresh litter on a regular basis.

Most kittens will start to use their litter box once they are shown its location, but it also helps to take a new kitten to the box after meals and naps. Some kittens will benefit from being confined to one room in the house until they are using the litter box consistently.

Another essential is a sleeping area. A cat bed will serve as a refuge when your kitten needs peace and quiet, so put some thought into its location. It should be in an area that is quiet and secure. Also, cats often prefer sleeping in places that are elevated above the floor.

There are many different types of cat beds on the market. Be sure to select one that is durable and washable.

Activity

Many cats feel stimulated to scratch to mark their territory after waking up from a nap. This is natural behaviour. You can deal with this instinct by placing a scratching post near your new kitten's sleeping area.

With a little patience, almost all kittens can be taught to establish their scratching behaviour on a suitable post instead of

on your furniture. Be sure the scratching post is sturdy, taller than your kitten will be as a full-grown adult and covered with rough and durable material.

Kittens and adult cats alike will thrive in a stimulating environment. They enjoy consistency in their daily lives, but not to the point of boredom.

Play is a very important activity for kittens. It is part of how they explore their environment, interact with humans and other kittens and learn to hunt. Many play behaviours, such as pouncing and biting, are the same as those used in hunting. Some kittens prefer toys that move in the air and resemble birds, while others

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It is very important to provide a safe indoor environment, as kittens are inquisitive and can easily get into trouble.



"Smokey," photo by Anthony Stacco, Brantford, Ont.

A scratching post should be sturdy and covered with rough, durable material.

enjoy toys that move along the floor, like mice.

All toys should be safe, with no removable parts. To prevent boredom, they should be rotated or replaced regularly.

Choose some toys that your kitten can play with on its own and others that will allow you to interact with your pet. Pet stores carry a wide variety of fancy toys, but many kittens are happy with simple items, like ping-pong balls or empty cardboard rolls. Other items that allow a kitten to play hide-and-seek, such as cardboard boxes and large paper bags, are also favourite toys.

Sitting in a window and watching the world outdoors will also entertain kittens, especially if there is a tree or bird feeder

nearby, so make sure they have ready access to such windowsills. Furthermore, most kittens can learn to walk on a leash with a harness outdoors. This will open up a whole new, stimulating world for them to explore in a safe way.

Human contact

Companionship and social contact are very important to kittens. When they are the only pets in a home, they will particularly benefit from human contact.

Schedule daily play sessions with your kitten. Enjoy quiet times as well, when your pet sits beside you or on your lap as you watch TV or listen to music.

Grooming is another occasion for social contact. Make sure you have appropriate grooming tools for your kitten's coat type and start using them regularly as soon as your new pet joins your home. Ask your veterinarian to teach you how to trim your kitten's nails.

Safety

Many cats live completely indoor lives and it is very important to provide a kitten-safe environment, as kittens are inquisitive and can get into trouble easily, sometimes causing themselves physical harm. Be aware of safety hazards, such as dangling cords from curtains or blinds, electrical cords that could be chewed, toxic plants and leftover threads from sewing or craft projects.

Get down on your hands and knees and look at the world through your kitten's eyes, checking for other safety hazards. Many of the safety products designed to protect toddlers in homes can work very well for cats, too.

Health

You will need to establish a relationship with a veterinarian right away, to provide not only care for your kitten, but also advice and counselling for you as a new kitten owner. Your veterinarian will schedule the necessary examinations, vaccinations, parasite control and, eventually, surgery to spay or neuter your new pet.

Your veterinarian can be a helpful resource for information about living with a new kitten in your home. He/she will probably have articles and brochures available for you, but a trip to your local bookstore can also help you find plenty of information about cat care.

In the end, the most important benefit to the life of your new kitten is you, an informed and educated pet owner. Take advantage of all of the information and resources available, including your veterinarian. The more thought and preparation you put into welcoming your new kitten to your home, the more rewarding the relationship will be for both of you. 🐾

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