

UNDER-SOCIALIZED KITTENS

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Defining “Under-Socialized”

Cats that have not received consistent positive interactions with humans before eight weeks of age are at very high risk of being scared of people. Under-socialized kittens and adult cats will hiss, swat, scratch, bite, or may simply attempt to run away from people, especially new ones. Most young kittens learn to trust people quickly, but some can take longer. Despite some setbacks early in life, under-socialized kittens can make excellent companions if they receive plenty of positive interactions in the critical early socialization period. As a caretaker of an under-socialized kitten, you will need plenty of time early on to spend with your cat, patience not to push the cat past their comfort level, and realistic expectations. Many of these kittens will become comfortable with their family members but may remain fearful or shy with strangers or in new situations for the rest of their lives.

Continued Socialization (what you will need to do in your home):

You will need to provide your kitten with the following:

- Multiple, short periods of human contact, providing gentle handling and playing with interactive toys. Although you don't have to be home all day, under-socialized kittens benefit from regular, focused attention and a consistent home routine.
- A limited, confined, safe place for the first few weeks, such as a small and quiet room, is a good way to introduce the kitten to your home. Keep a carrier open with blankets inside for the kitten to have a hiding spot/bed. This will help your kitten adjust to their new home gradually; larger spaces are too overwhelming. When the kitten is comfortable with the small space and waits for you without hiding, you can gradually increase their living space (see “Tips” below).
- A relatively quiet home with a regular routine is better for a scared kitten than a busy household. Under-socialized kittens tend to be better matches for homes with no young children since most children do not have the patience required to bring scared kittens out of their shells slowly, and some may scare the kittens with loud noises or sudden movements.

Tips on Socializing Fearful Kittens:

- Confine the kitten to a small room with a litter box, food and water, and a few safe hiding places that you can access easily. Avoid chasing the kitten all over the room by providing an easily accessible hiding space for the cat – hiding is a coping strategy for cats and can easily be provided by offering a cat carrier or a box with a towel or blanket inside.
- Move slowly and talk softly when approaching the kitten. Get down on the ground when you get closer to them.
- Use food to make friends! Make sure you feed at set times so they associate you with food. It may help at first to have just one or two people do this so the kitten can bond. Try hand-feeding some canned kitten food or kibble when you first approach.

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- Use toys to build confidence, for exercise, and as a fun way to bond. The best toys are interactive, like cat dancers or even shoelaces. This type of toy should not be left alone with a cat or kitten. Also, have toys like ping-pong balls available for solitary play. Once the kitten gets a little braver, you can even attach a ribbon to the back of your shoe and have them chase you around the house as you walk.
- Handling should be introduced slowly, do not pick the kitten up until they are ready. It can be tempting to reach for and pick the cat up before they are actively asking for it. Patience up front will pay off in the long run, so go slowly and allow the kitten to decide when it is time to be pet, picked up and held.
- Gradually introduce the kitten to the rest of the home under your supervision after they have grown to trust you. One new room at a time is best. If they're overwhelmed, put them back in their "safe" room.
- Gradually introduce them to new people, instructing the visitors what to do and what not to do. Make sure not to traumatize the kitten by overwhelming them and putting them in a situation that is beyond their capacity — such as a loud dinner party!
- Make the carrier a nice place. Whatever carrier you choose, keep it out and let the kitten get used to going in on their own accord. Cardboard carriers can be laid on their side with a little towel inside. You can put little bits of kibble (dry food) in there as treats. This will make trips out of the house and to the vet much easier later in life.
- Remember: An under-socialized kitten is still a kitten! Sometimes we mistake their scared behavior for being "mellow." At home, once comfortable (and often at night), they will likely be just as playful and active as other kittens.
- Do not allow or encourage play-biting. Do not wrestle with your kitten or use your fingers as toys. Cats should learn early on that hands are for petting, not biting. Under-socialized kittens can get very confused and potentially aggressive if handled incorrectly.
- Socialization takes time. Give the kitten multiple short visits every day.

Other Things to Consider:

- **Kitten-Proofing Your Home:** Kittens (and cats) are very good at making themselves small and sneaking into impossibly small spaces. It is essential to block off all possible holes and spaces, such as under the refrigerator or stove, before allowing your fearful kitten into a room. Windows that are not screened should never be left ajar, and screens should be checked carefully to ensure that the cat cannot push them out.
- **Introducing Your Other Cats:** A more outgoing cat can be helpful to a fearful kitten. With any new kitten or cat you take home, you should introduce your resident cat gradually (please see our handout on cat introductions). To create a bond with your new kitten, make sure to spend time alone with them.
- **Stay Indoors:** It is absolutely necessary to keep under-socialized kittens indoors due to their timid nature, as well as the dangers they face outdoors. An under-socialized cat is more likely to run away if frightened by street noises or strangers and may never return. Their fear and related survival instincts make them quite adept at hiding during the day. Often, they are too scared to come to their guardian and will need to be indoors only.

We are always here to help! You can find additional behavior and training resources at pasadenahumane.org/behavior.

Adapted from Northeast Animal Shelter



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