

# Cat: Adopting an Undersocialized Kitten



## What Does “Undersocialized” Mean?

Any kitten between the ages of 3 weeks and 7 weeks with a lack of positive interactions with humans is likely to be scared of people. Depending on the individual temperament of the kitten, the behavior of the parents, her age and previous experiences, she may show fearful behavior such as hissing, swatting, scratching or biting—or may simply attempt to run away. Most young kittens tend to learn to trust people quickly, but some kittens can take a longer time. Even undersocialized kittens can make wonderful companions provided they receive plenty of positive interactions in the critical early socialization period.

As an adopter of an undersocialized kitten you will need plenty of time early on to spend with your cat, patience not to push your cat past the level of comfort, and realistic expectations. Many of these kittens will be comfortable with their primary guardians, but may remain fearful or shy with strangers or in new situations.

## What Do Undersocialized Kittens Need?

- Multiple short periods of the presence of a person that can provide **gentle handling and playing with interactive toys**. Although you don't have to be home all day, these kitten benefit from regular focused attention and a consistent home routine
- A limited, confined safe place for the first few weeks such as a small, quiet room is a good way to introduce the kitten to your home. This will help your kitten adjust to her new home gradually; larger spaces are too overwhelming. When the kitten is comfortable with the small space and awaits you without hiding, you can gradually increase her living space (see “Tips” below).
- A relatively quiet home with a regular routine is better for a scared kitten than a busy household.

## What about Children?

These kittens tend to be better matches for homes with no young children, since most children do not have the patience required to bring them out of their shell softly and some may scare them with loud noises or sudden movements. Of course it depends on the parents and children and older children (children over 12 or so) can be suitable if they can follow the handling suggestions.

## What about Other Cats?

The presence of a more outgoing cat can be helpful to a fearful kitten, and with any new kitten or cat that you take home, you should make the introduction to your resident cat gradually. Please follow the strict protocol outlined in the *Introducing Cats* handout. We do not recommend adopting two undersocialized kittens at the same time. To create a bond with your new kitten, make sure to spend time alone with her.

## Indoors or Outdoors?

There are many reasons to keep cats indoors (see handout). It is absolutely necessary to keep undersocialized kittens indoors, due to their timid nature, as well as the dangers they face outdoors. An undersocialized 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

## Cat: Adopting an Under Socialized Kitten *(continued)*

trapped. Your cat will be happy living an indoor-only life as long as you provide her with the necessary stimulation and exercise.

### **Tips on Socializing Fearful Kittens:**

- Confine 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 her.
- Use food to make friends! Make sure you feed at set times, so she associates 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.
- Use toys to build confidence, for exercise, and as a fun way to bond. The best toys are the interactive kind, 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.
- Handle the kitty often. Pick her up gently, hold/cradle her until she relaxes in your arms. As she grows more comfortable with you, get her used to being pet all over. When she's older, you will want to be able to trim her nails, so get her used to having her paws handled at a young age.
- Gradually introduce the kitten to the rest of the home under your supervision after she's grown to trust you. One new room at a time is best. If she's overwhelmed, put her back in her "safe" room.
- Gradually introduce her to new people, instructing them first as to what to do and what not to do. Make sure not to traumatize her by overwhelming her and putting her in a situation that is beyond her 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 of her 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..
- Remember: an undersocialized 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 to 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.
- Undersocialized kittens can get very confused and potentially aggressive if handled incorrectly.
- Socialization takes time. Give the kitten multiple short visits every day.

### **A Note on Kitten-Proofing Your Home**

Kittens (and cats) are very good at making themselves small and sneaking into places that seem impossible to us. It is very important 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. Also make sure that toxic plants and substances, such as cleaning materials, are safely stored. Use cord-covers to prevent your kitten from chewing or playing with electrical cords. Check the handout for a list of toxic items.