

Caring for your kitten



CATS PROTECTION
ESSENTIAL GUIDE 15



Kittens are adorable, fun and unique, but it is important to remember that providing a home for a kitten is a commitment for its lifetime, which may be 15 to 20 years. Before you take on a new kitten, there are a few things to consider. Kittens are very mischievous, full of energy and often time consuming. If you are particularly keen to protect your curtains, sofa or other furniture, then you may like to consider adopting an adult or older cat.

There are responsibilities involved in owning any cat and if you are thinking about adopting a kitten, we would recommend you first read Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Caring for your cat*. Your new kitten will be a cat before you know it and you will need to understand how to look after their welfare throughout their life. However, there are also some additional considerations for kittens which this guide highlights. Although they do not stay young for long, the care you provide for your kitten will help ensure their happiness and set the path for you both to enjoy a lasting companionship.



One kitten or a pair?

This is often a personal decision for owners, based on their lifestyle, home and surrounding environment, the cat density of the local population, the extra expense of having a second kitten and personal preference.

If you are thinking of getting a pair of kittens, a sibling pair is often preferable to two unrelated kittens and character is more important than gender. If you are looking for a family pet for a busy home, look for a kitten that is alert, keen to approach visitors and playful with their litter mates. Be aware that the quiet one may potentially grow up to be an anxious or more fearful cat. This is fine if you are prepared to care for this type of cat and cater to their needs, but they may be less suited to a busy or noisy household.

Although two kittens homed from the same litter may remain sociable with each other as they approach adulthood, it is important that they have access to separate resources, such as litter trays and food bowls. Kittens may grow apart as they approach social maturity between 18 months and four years of age, so will need their own territory and resources to avoid conflict. For more information, see Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Cats living together*.



Feeding

Kittens should have access to fresh water and be given commercial kitten food to ensure their nutritional needs are met. Their food should be checked and replaced at least four times daily. Follow the manufacturer's instructions and avoid giving more than the total daily recommended amount as this can lead to obesity.

As kittens grow into adults, weight should be monitored closely to avoid under or over feeding. Speak to your vet about the most appropriate diet and feeding regime for your kitten and see Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Feeding and obesity*.

Sleep

Kittens are really playful and can race around and then fall asleep exhausted the next moment. A sleeping kitten can be very endearing, but it is important not to disturb them as good-quality sleep is needed for their growth and development, both physically and behaviourally. Just like babies, kittens need lots of sleep, so make sure they get plenty of time to rest.



Behavioural development and promoting the behaviour you want for a feline companion

Kittens do not stay young for long and the correct care in the early weeks and months can help them behave in a way that is best suited to you and your home, leading to a lasting relationship.

Your kitten learns what is normal and safe during a very sensitive period of development that occurs between two and eight weeks of age – the so-called ‘socialisation period’. During this time, kittens’ brains and sensory systems are still developing, and the things they see, hear, touch, smell and taste affect how this development occurs. This allows young cats to quickly understand what is normal about their world and what they should avoid.

If a kitten has been raised with its mother it is recommended that it stays with her until it is at least eight weeks of age so it can learn from her. For more information see Cats Protection’s *Essential Guide: Pregnant cats and care of young kittens*.

Socialisation and getting used to the home environment

The greater the variety of positive experiences kittens have between two and eight weeks of age – such as different sights, sounds and smells – the more likely they are to be able to adapt to whatever life throws at them in the future.

Kittens which have not been exposed to positive, new experiences during this sensitive period are more likely to be scared of novelty later in life. Cats born without exposure to people cannot usually be tamed and will remain scared of people throughout their lives, becoming feral cats.

This is why it is important for kittens to be socialised before eight weeks of age. Examples of socialisation include meeting different types of people from babies to adults, being gently touched and handled, and getting used to hearing different sounds – such as the noise of the washing machine and vacuum cleaner – while ensuring the kittens find these experiences enjoyable rather than threatening.

Kittens exposed to unrelated, non-aggressive cats while they are very young are more likely to be able to cope with the presence of other cats as adults. Likewise, kittens are more likely to form positive associations with dogs if they have positive interactions with dogs during the socialisation period.

However, most kittens do not stay in the home in which they are born and are acquired by their owners when they are aged eight weeks or over. This means they are approaching the end of this 'window of opportunity' to learn what is normal about their world. When choosing a kitten, try to find out how well socialised it is, so that you can choose a kitten most likely to adapt to your home.

When kittens over eight weeks of age are introduced to new experiences, it is important to go at a slow pace. Providing them with a quiet, dedicated room and allowing them to explore at their own pace will help them to build confidence and reduce the risk of anxiety and behavioural problems. Patience at the start will reap rewards later.

Encouraging appropriate play

A common reason for cats showing aggression towards people is due to learning at a young age that this is a good way of interacting. During normal development, kittens start to play with each other at four weeks old, as a way of practising hunting. Between five to six weeks of age, kittens will show hiding and searching behaviours that are either directed at another kitten or an object in their environment.

Direct object play starts a little later and is particularly noticeable between seven and eight weeks of age. To start with, kittens play with all sorts of objects, but as they develop, mothers provide opportunities to direct their kittens' behaviour towards appropriate prey items. Object play helps kittens to develop their balance and eye-paw co-ordination. Social play, including chasing behaviour, continues until it peaks at approximately 12 to 14 weeks.

In the home environment, people often make the mistake of playing with kittens with their fingers or by moving their feet around under the duvet. Although this may be fun with a young kitten, it can start to direct play or predatory behaviours towards the owner, which may be painful as the kitten becomes an adult cat.

Often this type of predatory aggression appears as 'ambushing' where the cat lies in wait, ready to attack as soon as someone walks by. To avoid this, don't encourage your kitten to play with your hair, fingers or toes. If they try to pounce on them, keep perfectly still, so there is nothing exciting for them to chase.

Cats showing this type of behaviour may be showing boredom. They should be provided with suitable toys to attack as this provides great mental stimulation and physical exercise. Time should be spent playing with the kitten or cat but the games should be distant from the body – for example, using 'fishing rod' type toys and ping pong balls. Rotate the toys often to keep the games interesting. Remember never to leave your kitten or cat unsupervised with toys which might be shredded or eaten, or cause entanglement, and check toys regularly for signs of wear, replacing when appropriate.



Consistency

Be consistent in your approach to a kitten, particularly with regard to what you will and won't allow, and make sure everyone in the household works to the same rules. For example, don't let them in a room one day, but not another – it will confuse them and may lead to behaviour you don't want.



Never punish your kitten as this can make them anxious or fearful. Gently say 'no' and ignore them for a short while or distract them with a toy. Reward the behaviour you do want by offering praise or a small treat.

Remember there are certain behaviours inherent to a cat, such as hiding, climbing, hunting or predatory-style playing, toileting and scratching. Ensure you give your cat opportunities to express these which are acceptable to you both or they will find options you may find less appealing, such as shredding the curtains!

Litter training

When it comes to litter training, most cats are quick to learn – usually they just need to be shown the litter tray and they know what to do. Kittens learn an association between going to the toilet and the material that is under their feet. The kitten forms a preference for toileting on that type of surface and will generally prefer this material throughout life.

The location of the litter tray is crucial for ensuring that cats are able to find and access it easily and feel safe when using the tray. It is best to place it in a secluded corner of the room, which is away from their bed, food and water bowls – avoid busy walkways. It is important that your kitten is not disturbed while using the litter tray. Try to provide the litter type they have been accustomed to using already, and make any changes gradually.

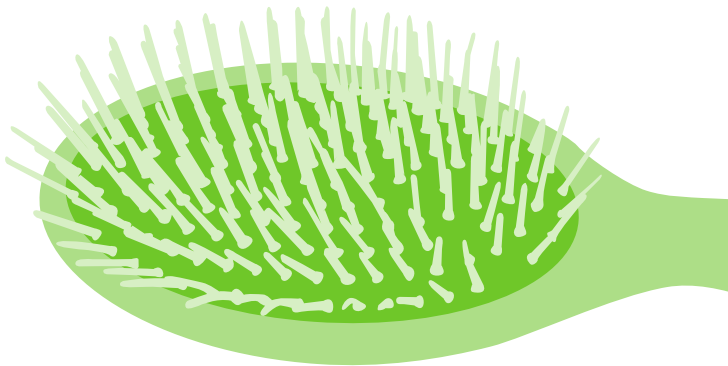
Remember that kittens grow up quickly and will soon need a larger, adult-sized tray instead of their kitten tray.

For more information, see Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Caring for your cat*.

Grooming

Whether you have a short-haired or long-haired kitten, it is important to gently groom them regularly so they get used to the feeling of being brushed. There are a variety of kitten brushes and grooming tools available. Grooming will help to keep your kitten's coat and skin healthy.

Groom your kitten for short periods while offering praise or small treats so that they form a positive association with grooming. Many cats need to be groomed regularly, particularly when they are elderly as they can struggle to keep their coat in good condition. It is much less stressful for the cat if they have been introduced to grooming at a young age. Grooming is also a great way to bond with your cat and some cats really enjoy being brushed. It is also a useful opportunity to check for injuries or lumps on the body.



Veterinary care

Find a vet

You will need to register your kitten with a vet. A recommendation from a friend or neighbour is a great place to start. Alternatively, you could phone around or visit the practice before making your choice. It's important to build a good relationship with your vet. Take your kitten for a health check as soon as you can, as well as any time that they are ill or injured.

Due to their small body size and immature immune systems, a kitten's health can deteriorate very quickly, so take them straight to the vets if they are unwell. Discuss all aspects of your cat's care with your vet and consider taking out pet insurance to ensure you can afford veterinary treatment should your cat be injured or fall ill unexpectedly. For more information see Cats Protection's *Veterinary Guide: You and your vet*.

Vaccination

Kittens should be vaccinated from eight or nine weeks of age and they require a second vaccination from 12 weeks of age to protect them against some serious infectious diseases. Even if your kitten is kept indoors, it is recommended that they are vaccinated as they may be at risk of disease from other animals in the household or infections that have accidentally been transferred in from outside on an owner's hands, shoes or clothes.

Speak to your vet to discuss your kitten's specific vaccination needs. For more information see Cats Protection's *Veterinary Guide: Infectious disease and vaccination*.

Microchip

Cats Protection recommends microchipping as the safest and simplest means of permanently identifying your cat. A microchip carries a unique number linked to a database holding your contact details, allowing you to be quickly traced should they stray and be scanned. Be sure to get your kitten microchipped before letting them outside for the first time. For more information see Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Microchipping*.

Parasites

There are many different types of parasites that can affect cats and some can be especially harmful to kittens. Veterinary products to protect against fleas and worms are effective and safe but it is important to seek advice from your vet and follow product instructions carefully. For more information see Cats Protection's *Veterinary Guide: Fleas and other parasites*.

Neutering

Neutering – spaying for females and castration for males – can be carried out at four months of age or younger. Neutered cats may live healthier lives and it is the most humane way to stop unwanted pregnancies and minimise the unwanted cat population. Neutering also prevents some cancers and reduces straying, fighting and spraying. For more information see Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Neutering – family planning for felines*.

Hazards

Kittens are very inquisitive and love to explore, but be aware that there can be hazards around the house. While you must always make sure your cat has a safe retreat where they can hide, it's important to kitten-proof the house to help keep your kitten safe. Kittens can squeeze into the smallest of spaces and have a habit of sleeping in peculiar places.

Block off any gaps between cupboards, furniture and kitchen appliances. Screen off open fireplaces and always supervise your kitten if you have lit a fire. Keep cupboards, washing machines and tumble driers closed. Toilet lids should be kept down, to avoid the risk of drowning or coming into contact with cleaning chemicals. Ensure that hot liquids are never left unsupervised. Keep all cables and wires securely protected and out of reach.

Kittens should never have access to balconies and all external doors and windows should be kept closed, or safely fenced over with strong wire mesh, ensuring there are no gaps that your kitten could fall through. It is best to check kittens regularly through the day to ensure they haven't got up to any mischief.

For further advice on potential hazards, see Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Keeping your cat safe*.

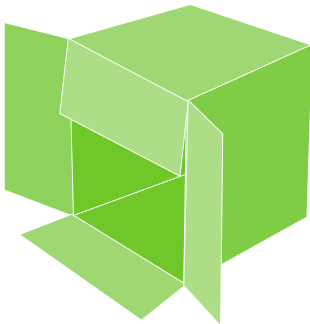
Bringing a new kitten home

The first few hours after bringing any cat home can really affect how well they accept their new life. First and foremost, be prepared to be patient and never attempt to rush your kitten into doing things they may not be ready for. Being creatures of habit, a change of environment is always stressful for a cat, so it will often take a few weeks for them to gradually settle and feel safe in their new home.

Before collecting your kitten, set aside a dedicated, secure room. This area should include their food and water bowls, litter tray and ideally something that smells familiar that they have previously put their own scent on.

It is best not to leave a kitten alone until they have settled. Provide them with a warm, secure bed at ground level – a cardboard box will do. Once they've had a look around, show them where their litter tray, bowls and bed are by gently tapping these items. They may feel a little unsettled if they are used to living with their mother and siblings, so when you are not there, a soft toy or low-volume radio might help them feel at ease.

For more advice on bringing your kitten home, see Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Caring for your cat*.



Introducing your kitten to others in the household

Kittens and children

Although kittens are more fragile and injured more easily than adult cats, they can still be a suitable pet for children providing there are careful measures in place to ensure a mutually beneficial relationship. Growing up with a pet can be an extremely rewarding experience for any youngster. Many children regard their cat as their best friend and it is through this friendship that important lessons are learned in trust, empathy, care and love, which help children become responsible and caring adults. When choosing a kitten, look for one that is responsive, energetic and happy to approach. Don't allow any encounters that hurt or frighten the kitten as it may lead to a negative association and the kitten may grow up to resent being handled.

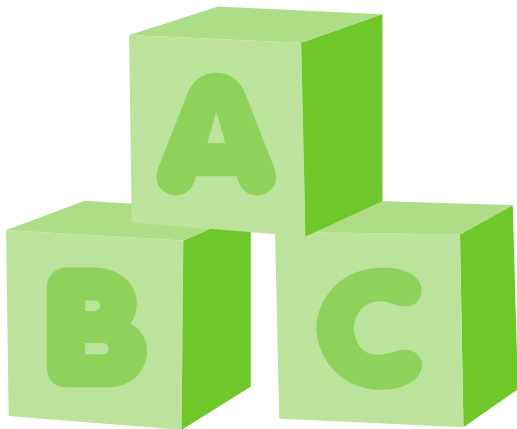
From their earliest days, children can be taught to be gentle and kind with kittens. Children learn best by example, so if you treat your kitten gently with love and respect, it's more likely your children will grow up to do the same.

When your children are old enough to understand, explain that kittens like to be left alone when sleeping, hiding, toileting or eating and that they can become frightened when people shout, make sudden movements or try to grab them. Kittens are very active and care needs to be taken as they can climb up legs, or inadvertently scratch or bite while playing. Children soon learn to interpret the signs of an unhappy cat – the swishing tail, ruffled-up fur or hissing – and will avoid doing things that upset them.

Your children will love helping to take care of your kitten too, so involve them in the feeding, grooming and playing routines and you'll have happy children and a happy kitten!

Kittens should be provided with a room or area in the house that is out of bounds to children, especially as kittens need to sleep for long periods frequently throughout the day. When they are awake, they need short intensive play sessions, while ensuring that they do not become too exhausted.

Fishing rod toys are a great way for children to interact safely with kittens, while teaching the kitten appropriate items to which to direct play behaviour. Water and food should be readily available and easy to find so they can feed little and often. Small treats can be given to kittens to form positive associations with children. For more information see Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Cats and people*.



Kittens and cats

Introducing unfamiliar cats and kittens should be done very slowly and there is no guarantee that they will peacefully cohabit. This process can be helped by providing separate bowls and litter trays in a variety of different places in the home to avoid conflict and competition.

If cats are forced together too quickly, it may lead to lifelong conflict and stress which is difficult to resolve – first impressions are all important. For more detailed information on introducing cats, see Cats Protection's *Essential Guides: Cats living together* and *Welcome home*.





Kittens and dogs

A slow and gradual introduction can make all the difference when introducing a kitten and a dog to each other. However, this is no guarantee of success and some cats will never get along with a dog.

It can be easier if both the kitten had positive experiences with dogs during the socialisation period of two to eight weeks of age and vice versa. For detailed information on introducing kittens to dogs, see Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Welcome home*.

Letting your kitten outside

Sadly, many young cats are lost through straying or being involved in road traffic accidents. Even so, allowing your cat outside access will provide them with enrichment and opportunities to express their natural behaviour. It is sensible to take adequate precautions before first letting your kitten outside. Don't risk letting your kitten outside until they have:

- adjusted to their new indoor environment and considers it home. The time this takes will depend on the individual kitten, but will usually be a few weeks at least. Your kitten should be showing confidence around you and others in the home and they will have built up a scent profile enabling them to find their way back
- been fully vaccinated to protect them against some infectious diseases they may encounter outside
- been neutered. Cats reach sexual maturity from four months of age, and sadly many young cats are lost or injured in road traffic accidents while exploring their new environments and searching for suitable mates. Neutering may reduce this risk. At least ensure only supervised access outside before neutering and ensure your kitten is booked in for neutering promptly
- been microchipped. It is important that you can be traced quickly in case your kitten becomes lost and is found by someone else

When you do let them out:

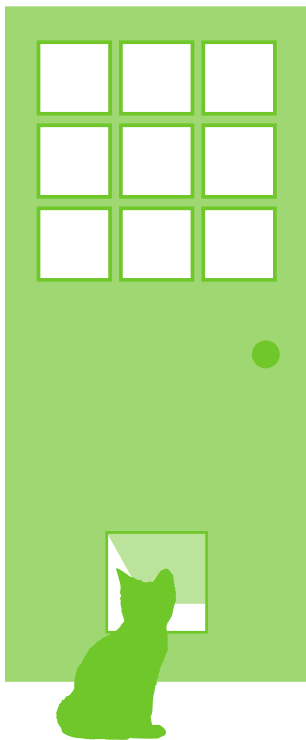
- do it when it is quiet and just before a mealtime when they are hungry so you can call them back with their favourite food
- open the door and step outside, encouraging your cat to go with you
- don't pick them up. Let them make the decision to go outside themselves
- leave the door open so they can run back into the house if they feel insecure
- only let them out for short periods at first. You can gradually build up the time they are out until you are confident they can come and go as they please. Always keep them in at night, to protect them from injury and reduce hunting of wildlife
- make sure the immediate environment does not contain hazards – see Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Keeping your cat safe* for more tips

For further advice on indoor and outdoor cats, see Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Indoor and outdoor cats*.



Cat flap training

Kittens usually learn how to use a cat flap quite quickly. Start training them by holding the door open and luring them near the cat flap with small, palatable treats – perhaps part of their daily food ration. Give them the treats to reward their progress little and often while training. Hold the treat the other side of the cat flap and call them to encourage them to walk through the cat flap. Repeat this process until they will happily walk through the cat flap in both directions. The next step is to gradually lower the cat flap, so that it is only partially open. They will soon need to push against it slightly in order to go through. Continue to provide encouragement, praise and treats until you can eventually shut the cat flap and they will pass through happily.



Finding your kitten

If you are happy that you've got the time to spend with a new kitten and you are prepared for the expense – including the ongoing costs like food, cat litter and veterinary care – please come and visit one of Cat Protection's branches or adoption centres where we will be pleased to help you find the right kitten for you. Our branches and centres are at their busiest with kittens needing loving homes during the 'kitten season', which is roughly between April and October.

To find your nearest branch or adoption centre, please call our National Helpline on 03000 12 12 12. All kittens homed from Cats Protection will have received a mandatory level of veterinary care, which includes:

- a health check carried out by a veterinary surgeon, with treatment as required
- treatment against fleas, roundworms and tapeworms
- at least one vaccination against cat flu and enteritis
- neutering if old enough
- a microchip if 12 weeks of age – and in many cases younger
- four weeks' free pet insurance

Learn more about your cat online!

Take a look at our free interactive tool to help you understand cats' origins and their behaviour within our homes. <http://learnonline.cats.org.uk/content/ufo>

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For more information about Cats Protection or to make a donation, please visit www.cats.org.uk or phone our Helpline on 03000 12 12 12.

Reg Charity 203644 (England and Wales) and SC037711 (Scotland)

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