



Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

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Developmental Stages of Kitten Behavior

Well-socialized cats are more likely to have well-socialized kittens. Kittens "feed" off their mother's calm or fearful attitude toward people. Although feeding time is important, it is also vital to include petting, talking and playing in order to build good "people-skills" in your kitten.

Kittens are usually weaned at six or seven weeks, but may continue to suckle for comfort as their mother gradually leaves them more and more. Orphaned kittens, or those weaned too soon, are more likely to exhibit inappropriate suckling behaviors later in life. Ideally, kittens should stay with their littermates (or other role-model cats) for at least 12 weeks.

Kittens orphaned or separated from their mother and/or littermates too early often fail to develop appropriate "social skills," such as learning how to send and receive signals, what an "inhibited bite" means, how far to go in play-wrestling and so forth. Play is important for kittens because it increases their physical coordination, social skills and learning limits. By interacting with their mother and littermates kittens learn how to communicate using appropriate feline body language, as well as explore the ranking process ("who's in charge").

Kittens that are handled 15 to 40 minutes a day during the first seven weeks are more likely to develop larger brains. They are more exploratory, more playful and are better learners. Skills not acquired during the first eight weeks may be lost forever. While these stages are important and fairly consistent, a cat's mind remains receptive to new experiences and lessons well beyond kitten-hood. Most cats are still kittens, in mind and body, through the first two years.

The following chart provides general guidelines for the stages of development.

0 - 2 weeks = Neonatal

- ▶ Learning to orient toward sound.
- ▶ Eyes are opening, usually by two weeks.
- ▶ Minimal social interaction with mother and littermates.
- ▶ Unable to eat, regulate temperature, or eliminate without assistance.

2 - 8 weeks = Early Socialization

- ▶ Slowly ceases drinking milk and starts eating solid food.

- ▶ Sense of smell becomes fully developed.
- ▶ Motor skills develop further and kittens start playing with objects and littermates.
- ▶ Social interactions with littermates and humans begin. Scratching, predatory behavior, and grooming of themselves and others.
- ▶ Gains control of bowel and bladder function and is able to start using litterbox.

8 - 16 weeks = Late Socialization

- ▶ Social and object play hit peak levels. Climbs, ambushes, pounces, and wrestles in play.
- ▶ Conflict over status may emerge.
- ▶ Begins to lose baby teeth.

16 weeks - 1 year = Adolescence

- ▶ Sexual maturity occurs. May spray to mark territory, if not altered.
- ▶ May begin to challenge other cats for status.
- ▶ May begin to wander away from home, if allowed outside.
- ▶ Social play lessens.