

Introducing Your Kitten to Your Home

When you first bring your kitten home, you need to take steps to make the adjustment easier on both you and your kitten. A new place is scary for your kitten, so remember to take each step slowly and work at your kitten's pace. Whether your home houses other animals or not, you should introduce your kitten to one room at first, then add another, and so on. The same holds true for new people and objects. Introducing a kitten to new environments and people is a process that should be done gradually.

When bringing your kitten into your home for the first time, she should be in a carrying case. Before you bring her into her room, you should kitten-proof it; do not leave small objects lying around. Cats are very curious animals, and if there are small objects around for the kitten to play with or chew on, in many cases she will. Anything that is in the room that dangles or hangs should also be adjusted so the kitten cannot reach it. In addition, set the room up with a litter box, food, water, and one or two toys to investigate. Bring her into the room while still in her carrier. For now, the door to the carrier should remain closed for about a half hour. At this point, you simply leave your kitten alone. Any family member who wants to stay with her can, but they must speak softly to the kitten and sit still.

In about a half hour, you should check on your kitten. If she is meowing or near the front of her carrier asking to be let out, you can do so in this one room. Make sure someone sits with her quietly and gives her the time and space she needs to be comfortable with her new surroundings. Open the door to the carrier and let her come out on her own. Keep an eye on her but do not interact with her unless she initiates it by coming over to you. Make sure you keep the door to the room shut; once she decides to come out of the carrier, she may enjoy exploring her new environment or try to hide somewhere you cannot reach her.

Over the next few days, leave the kitten in her new room and make frequent visits to play and pet her if she will allow it. Give her time to investigate you and come to you on her own. Make sure the room you leave her in has been kitten-proofed so she cannot get hurt or in trouble.

When your kitten begins to cry when you leave her alone, it is time to open the door of the room to which she has been confined. Make sure other doors throughout your home are closed. You will want to give her time to get used to different areas in your home slowly. Let her come out of the room on her own.



Introducing Your Kitten to Other Pets

Around the third or fourth day after you bring your kitten home and she is comfortable with the first room you gave her, put the kitten into her carrier and bring her into the family room or other room where your family spends time together. If you have more than one pet, introduce the other pets to the kitten while she is still in her carrier, one at a time. Let one pet out to sniff and look at the new family member. Stay with your pets and supervise their behavior. At first, most kittens will exhibit anxious behavior with the new animal. Give both animals time to look at and watch each other. If after a half hour or so the kitten is still in the back of her carrier, take her back into the original room, where she is already comfortable. If the other pet is a dog and making noises (for example, barking) toward the kitten, ask him to settle down and be quiet. When he does, mark and reward his quiet behavior.

Kittens can be somewhat skittish, especially when they have not had socialization opportunities. Loud noises, such as hearing a dog bark for the first time, can be frightening to your kitten. Dogs do bark at strangers, especially if they have not had socialization opportunities with cats prior to the new kitten. Your dog may get excited when meeting this new friend, and he could scare the kitten unintentionally. Do not scold your dog for barking; ask for quiet instead. If you would like information on how to train your dog to be quiet on cue, please let us know.

If your dog can settle down, then let the two animals look at and smell each other while the kitten is in her carrier until your dog gets bored with the new kitten and lies down or walks away.

If your kitten is being introduced to an older cat in your home, do the same thing. Let the resident cat check out the kitten, if she will, and make sure to give the older cat lots of attention. In many cases, the resident cat will snub the new kitten or hiss at her. This is because another feline has infiltrated her territory. Within a few weeks, this snubbing and hissing behavior generally dwindles and eventually ceases. In some cases, however, this behavior lessens but still continues. It may help to hold your older cat and give her lots of additional attention. This should help to stop the jealousy issues some cats have when a new kitten is brought into the home. Sometimes your older cat will never accept the new kitten. Your older cat will, however, learn to tolerate the new kitten, even if she does not like her. Give your resident cat lots of attention to reassure her she is still top cat in the house.

For the first encounter with the other pet(s), five to ten minutes is enough time together for introductions. Depending on how the animals react to one another, only one minute may be enough time. Watch the interaction, and if either pet becomes too aroused or concerned, put the kitten back in her room and close the door. You can try the introductions again later that day or the next. If the first introduction went well, repeat the exercise a few more times the first day.

The next step is to bring your kitten into the room with the other animal present and open the door to her carrier. Make sure there are places for your kitten to hide if she feels threatened. Again, allow only one resident pet to meet her at any given time. Supervise both of them closely. The kitten should be allowed to come out of hiding in her own time. This may take a while, so you will need some patience. Remember to not scold or reprimand your dog for barking. Being escorted out of the room and not being able to stay with you is reprimand enough.

Repeat this introduction exercise with all family pets, one at a time, until they begin to get comfortable with one another. In time, many will become great friends and even share mealtimes together. Once all the pets have had many opportunities to check out their new family member, it is time to allow more than one resident pet at a time with the kitten in the room.

At first, with two resident pets checking her out, the kitten will most likely be afraid and hide. If the other two pets are dogs, ask them to be quiet and settle down. If the dogs do not quiet down, take them out of the room. Repeat this exercise later in the day until the dogs can be quiet when they are with the kitten. When introducing your kitten to other resident cats, the same supervision is needed. Again, cats can be very territorial animals. Keep this in mind because your other cats may snub and/or terrorize your new kitten. If you can let them work this out on their own, it will be easier for both of them. However, if you feel one animal is in danger, your intervention may be necessary.

Depending on the animals' reactions to each other, the introductions can take a few hours or as long as a few weeks. This is the most important time for all the animals. They will all need time to adjust to each other, and that time should be given.

When introducing any other animal, follow the same set of guidelines. When raised together, many animals can learn to be friendly with one another. However, it is important to note that some animals may not get along. For example, if you have a pet bird, you should not leave your bird and your kitten together unsupervised. Cats are predatory animals and instinctively they will most likely try to eat your bird. However, sometimes even the most unusual relationships can be formed for a lifelong friendship.



Playing Safely with Your Kitten

Learning to play safely with your kitten entails paying close attention to what you are doing as a kitten parent. Cats have a tendency to be full of energy one minute and napping the next. Think of the term “catnap.” We use this to describe a short and quick nap. The reason it is called catnap is because cats do this repeatedly throughout the day.

When your new kitten has overcome her initial fear of being in her new home, it is important for you to understand that she will start displaying her curiosity through energetic exploring. To help her display this energy in a positive way, you need to play with her. It is your job to help her get her mental and physical exercise needs met.

Kittens basically have two modes of play: predatory and locomotive. Predatory play includes behaviors such as pouncing, grabbing, chasing, and throwing things in the air. Locomotive play includes behaviors such as running, climbing, leaping, and finding places the kitten can go into and come out of quickly, such as a paper bag or a box.

To play safely with your kitten, give her toys that stimulate both modes of play. For predatory play, balls, fake mice (especially those that make noise), and laser pointers are excellent suggestions. Keep in mind, however, that you do not want to get any objects small enough that your kitten can swallow them. Objects with feathers, although fun for your cat, will end up in pieces around your house. Kittens enjoy tinsel toys too, but they should be offered only during supervised playtime. For locomotive play, one suggestion is to get a cat climber. These come in many different sizes and types. They can be used not only as a place to climb and run through but also as a scratching post or a place to sleep. You can also have a cat tree for your kitten to climb on, scratch, and lay down on so she can oversee her territory.

Social play is great for your kitten, too. However, never use your feet or hands as play objects with a cat. Your kitten cannot tell the difference between your appendages and his toy mouse if both are being presented as toys!

Social play is interaction between your kitten and people or other animals within the household. This type of play is important not only for getting along with the family members, but also if you want your kitten to be comfortable around guests in your house.



Pouncing On Legs

Some kittens like to pounce on legs or toes when people walk by them. This is part of kittens' normal predatory play drive, but can still be very annoying. Some kittens will do this to let you know they want to be played with. Either way, you do not want to reward this behavior with your attention. Yelling at her or caressing her is still attention and, to a large extent, both are exactly what she wants—your attention. This is one way the kitten can tell you she needs some interactive playtime with you or with some toys. Kittens love to pounce on things; it is their predatory play drive in action. Toys such as a laser light she can chase around the room and then pounce on when it is hovering in one spot allows her to complete her predatory play drive. If she does not receive this kind of playtime, you are leaving it up to her to find something to pounce on, such as your legs. Contrary to popular belief, kittens do need interactive time with their families. They do not enjoy being left alone all the time. They need love, socialization, and playtime with all family members.

Here are some ways you can address the pouncing behavior:

- Make a loud noise to startle her (e.g., clap, snap, shake a plastic bottle with coins in it, or make a loud sound such as saying the word “Ouch” in a loud voice) and walk away from the kitten.
- Catch the kitten letting you walk by her and not pouncing on you, and mark and reward her gentle behavior with a nice long pet, treats, or your attention.
- When you can see that the kitten is getting ready to pounce on you, quickly get up and walk out of the room while completely ignoring her. Later, when she allows you to walk by without pouncing, give her lots of love and special attention. This is a perfect time to play with her, using a toy she can pounce on to get her predatory needs met while she is being a good girl.
- Use treats, circular touches, or simply your attention as the reward for good behavior.
- Enrich the kitten's environment by offering a more interesting variety of toys to stimulate her mentally. If she is bored, she might think your legs are the only toys available to her.
- Exchange the kitten's toys frequently. Offer one toy at a time for a few days and then put that toy away and offer her another toy. When you exchange her toys, they will stay interesting to her. If toys are all left out all the time, she will become bored with all of them.

In many cases, when kittens offer inappropriate behaviors, it is because they are bored.



Counter and Table Surfing

Kittens are very curious animals. When something on a table looks interesting to them, they will want to go see what it is. These objects can include photo frames, candles, coasters, vases, or anything new to the kitten. For a kitten, all of these objects are possible play toys. Kittens like to jump up onto surfaces; this is part of their play drive, and an inherent instinct in kittens.

Most kittens enjoy keeping an eye on their territory from a high point in a room. One of the easiest ways to address this behavior is to use a cat tree or climber that allows your kitten to find a vantage point higher than the countertop so she can be above her territory. Putting a little catnip on the tree will entice her to climb the tree to the highest vantage point. If higher than your countertops, she will develop a preference for the tree. Place the cat tree in a location where she can see inside and outside if possible.

Some ways you can interrupt the counter and table surfing behavior are listed here:

- Make a loud noise, such as a clap or a snap.
- Use a spray water bottle. Spray the kitten when she jumps up. Make sure the kitten associates the spray with the act of jumping up and does not associate it with you. (Spray and then hide the bottle.)
- Remove any items your kitten is intrigued with from countertops or tables.
- Use heavier items that are not easily knocked over to decorate countertops.
- Consider using something to put under the item so it sticks to the countertop.
- Use a training device such as a Scraminal.®



Knocking Things Over

A kitten will sooner or later knock over and break something of value. In most cases, this is not an accident. Some kittens will actually stretch out their front paws to knock things over. It may seem like a strange thing to do; however, this is due to the kitten's curiosity and play drive. Kittens when left alone for extended periods of time will look for something to entertain themselves. One of the things they may do is knock things over. This is not done out of spite; it is the result of the kitten being bored. Kittens do enjoy company, and when left alone for extended periods of time, they simply get bored.

Here are some suggestions for addressing this behavior:

- Kitten-proof your home. Put items away so the kitten does not have anything to knock over.
- Offer the kitten a cat tree and place it by a window. Put the cat tree in a location that gives her an excellent high view of her territory. Rubbing a little catnip on the tree will pique her curiosity and she will investigate it. Soon she will begin marking it to make the tree her very own by rubbing on it, scratching it, and laying on it.
- Keep fragile items in a place the kitten cannot reach.
- If the kitten knocks items over only when left alone, take short trips out of the house. When you return, if she has not knocked items over, give her lots of attention and tell her what a good kitty she is. Gradually extend the length of time you leave her alone, ignoring her when she has knocked items over and giving her lots of attention and praise when she does not.
- Offer the kitten a different toy to play with and to entertain herself with when you are leaving the house. Toys filled with treats are great fun and stimulate kittens. Figuring out how to get the treats out of the toy is both entertaining and stimulating. When your kitten has toys that stimulate and entertain her, she has less reason to look for items in your home to knock over.
- When the kitten knocks items over when you are home, you can use a spray bottle and spray her, but only if you can catch her in the act of knocking items over. Or you can snub her and walk away. Do not give her any attention for at least 10 minutes. When using a spray bottle, it is important that the kitten is conditioned to the spray being bad and does not associate it with you, so hide the bottle the second after you spray her.
- If you have decorative items you want to leave out, consider getting some glue dots to stick under your decorative items to keep them in place even if she does try to knock them over.
- It is a good idea to consider heavier items for decoration purposes. The heavier the items are, the more difficult it will be for her to knock them over.
- Spend time interacting with your kitten. She needs and enjoys your attention.
- Provide play periods with family members; the kitten needs her locomotive and predatory play drive needs met.

Bathing Your Kitten

Giving your kitten a bath while she is young will help her feel more comfortable with baths in the future. Although cats usually groom themselves, sometimes—depending on how long their hair is—they will need a bath occasionally. Getting her used to baths now will make the experience easier for her in the future.

Be sure to use shampoos and conditioners specifically made for kittens. Be sure to protect your kitten's ears from getting water in them. You will also want to be careful not to get soap in her eyes.

Depending on where you choose to bathe her, be sure to introduce the water slowly. The kitchen sink works well with kittens and with adult cats if they are not too big. Turn the water on gently, opposite from the side of the sink where the kitten is sitting. This will allow her time to get used to the sound of the water.

While slowly running the water out of the faucet, put a handful of water over her back to give her a chance to experience the feel of the water on her coat. If she squirms or tries to run away, stop putting water on her but keep the water running on the other side of the sink. Do some touches on her face with your index or middle finger. Start on her forehead and do tiny circles, moving her skin around one and a quarter times in one spot. Work your way down to the top of her nose and just do a few slow circular touches until she calms down.

This will calm down most cats. Once she has calmed down, again try putting a handful of water on her back. Repeat this a few times until she becomes comfortable and is not struggling to get away. If after a few tries she is still fighting you, do a few more touches on her forehead, put her in a towel and gently rub her for a minute or so, and put her on the floor. For today, bath time is over. Practice this a few days in a row until she becomes comfortable with the water on her back.

It is very important that you, rather than the kitten, decide when she leaves. If you let her go when she wants to, she will train you to do things her way. This is an opportunity to let her know you are here to understand and help her, but events will happen when you say they will, and not when she demands.

If the kitten is comfortable with the handful of water on her back, then you can move the nozzle from the sink over to her and let it run on her coat gently. Let her get used to the feel of the water. Once she is willing to hold still for a few seconds, you can begin her bath.

For the first actual bath, do not use much soap. The first bath is more of an opportunity for her to get comfortable with being bathed. The following day you can give her a real bath, but do not do too much too quickly. You want her to get used to baths so she will not fight you in the future.



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Litter Box Troubleshooting

Kittens do not usually have to be trained to use a litter box once they know where it is and, of course, if it is in a convenient yet somewhat private location. However, there are some cases in which a kitten will not use the litter box. If the kitten is eliminating inappropriately, there is probably a preference problem. In these cases, some of the tips given below may help to determine the kitten's preferences. Wait a week or two between each change to allow the kitten to make a choice and show her preference.

You can try using a different litter. Some kittens prefer litters that clump because they are softer. When trying out a new litter, it is important that you get another litter box identical to the one you already have. Put the same amount of the current litter in one box and the new litter in the other box. Let the kitten make her own decision. Try this for two weeks before making a final decision on which litter your kitten prefers.

Try changing the amount of litter you put in the box. Some kittens prefer a lot of litter (four to six inches), and others prefer little to none. Try adjusting the level of litter over a week or two. Start off with just an inch or so of litter in one box and no litter in another. Over the next week, gradually increase the amount of litter you put in her box.

If you have more than one cat, get separate litter boxes for each plus one extra. Cats often do not like sharing their litter boxes.

You can also try to slowly change the box's location, little by little. It should be placed somewhere that is easily accessible for your kitten, offers escape routes, and is quiet and private because cats do enjoy their privacy.

Make sure to clean the litter box on a regular basis. Kittens do not like dirty litter boxes or dirty litter. Scoop the box out a few times a day and wash the litter box at least once a month. If urine or feces gets stuck to the box, the box should be washed immediately.

Check whether the litter box is large enough for your cat. Many commercial litter boxes are not big enough for many cats. If you think this could be a concern, consider a larger plastic container for the cat to eliminate in. A good general rule for litter box size is three times the length of your cat from nose to tail. Plastic storage boxes that are designed to go under a bed make excellent litter boxes. They are usually long enough for most cats and low enough for easy entry and exit.

Be sure the litter box offers an easy entrance and exit for your cat. If it does not, you may want to open up the side further or consider a new box.

When you first bring your kitten home, you should keep her in one room. This room should contain her litter box. As you gradually introduce your kitten to more areas of your house, the litter box can be moved with her. When she has access to the full house, you can move the litter box slowly, a foot or so every day until it has reached its new location.

If you have a large home, consider getting multiple litter boxes. Again, place these in areas where they are easily accessible and provide privacy and escape routes.

You can also begin to reward your kitten's good behavior! Pay close attention to your kitten. When she uses her litter box, give her a treat! This may help her want to use her box more frequently and stop the inappropriate elimination.

Any recent changes in lifestyle or home surroundings may cause your cat to suddenly stop using her litter box as well. Cats are very sensitive to any sort of change, and this may be the root of the problem. Sometimes simply moving furniture around is enough of a disturbance for a kitten to stop using her litter box. If you have moved furniture around, make sure your kitten knows where her litter box is and give her lots of assurance that everything is okay. This is, in fact, a great time to introduce a new litter box and reward her when she does use her new litter box.

