

Bringing Home Your New Kitten

What is the best way to introduce my new kitten to my home?

A new home with new sights, new sounds, and new smells can be a scary place for a young kitten, but there are things you can do to make the transition easier. Your new kitten likely left behind a loving mother, playful siblings, and a familiar environment, so he needs a little special care when being introduced to his new surroundings and new family.



Getting started

Your kitty needs to feel comfortable with you as soon as possible, so start your relationship by interacting with him on his own turf where he feels safe and secure. Spend time playing and cuddling him before taking him away from his familiar environment. Bring home the comforting scent of his current home by petting his mother and siblings if they are present. Better yet, bring along a towel and rub his family members or even the inside of his kennel to carry these *old* scents to your kitty's *new* home. Familiar smells warm the heart and steady the nerves.

Going home

The ride home should be as pleasant as possible. Place the scented towel in a cat carrier and gently place your kitten inside. If he resists, remove the top of the carrier rather than nudging him through the door. Cats prefer cozy spots so they usually like being in a carrier. By encouraging your kitten to ride within the confines of a carrier, you are providing safety and security, as well as starting a good routine that you can maintain for future car rides.

Arriving home

When you arrive at home, place the kitten and carrier in a small, quiet room in the house away from traffic. Open the door of the carrier and allow the cat some time to come out willingly. Place fresh water, food, and a litter box near the entrance of the carrier. Allow the kitty to come and go at will. If he cowers in the back of the pet caddy and refuses to venture out after 30 minutes, gently remove the top of the carrier, pick him up, and show him the food and water bowls and litter box. If the kitten is very tiny, a small litter box with low sides may be necessary at first. If possible, duplicate the type of litter material used in the previous home (see Litter Box Training).

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All kittens will need time to investigate their new surroundings. This is less overwhelming for your new kitten if you initially limit the available space by keeping him in a single room. Give him lots of time to become familiar with this room before giving him a tour of the entire house. Gradually introduce him to rest of the one room at a time, and always stay with him when you bring him to other rooms.

Staying home alone

After interacting with your kitten on your turf, your scent will replace the smells associated with his old home and you will become his source of security. He will find comfort in having you around, but you can't always be with him so your kitty must learn to stay at home alone. Set up a safe and secure area where you can leave your kitten when you are not around to supervise.

This location should be large enough to accommodate a food bowl, water bowl, litter box, toys, and a resting area. Remember that cats prefer to have their food and water separated from the litter box, so designate a separate feeding area, litter box area, and resting/play area. Make sure the area is cat-proofed by removing things that may cause injury (sharp objects, string, electrical cords, rubber bands or other items that could be swallowed) and inspect the areas for nooks and crannies where a kitten might hide or get stuck. Cats are natural explorers and independent by nature, so most investigate and adjust to their safe haven readily.

Preventing problems before they start

The key to preventing behavior problems in kittens is to identify and provide appropriate outlets for all of their needs. This is especially important for indoor kittens since all of their playing, hunting, exploring, climbing, scratching, eliminating, and socializing will need to be channeled into acceptable indoor options.



Encouraging safe and appropriate play activities from the first day in your home will make life much more pleasant for you and your cat. Most of the physical activity of an outdoor cat is focused on the hunt. Indoor cats do not have to hunt for food, so interactive play that satisfies the hunting instinct makes for a happy cat. In fact, stalking and pouncing are important play behaviors in kittens that facilitate proper muscular development, so these activities should be encouraged within reason.

Provide predatory play sessions by playing together with wands, movable toys, or small lights. Chasing a toy attached to a wand or batting around a soft ball gives the cat needed outlet for his hunting instinct. The best toys are lightweight and movable. Avoid toys that are small enough to be swallowed and keep string and ribbon out of reach. These items can cause serious intestinal problems if they are swallowed.

Serving food inside foraging toys and hiding treats inside boxes or paper bags also piques a cat's interest in exploration (see Enrichment for Indoor Cats, Play and Play Toys, and Play and Investigative Behaviors).

In addition to play sessions with owners, highly social and playful cats may also benefit from having a second social and playful cat in the home provided a safe hierarchy has been established. In other words, all cats involved recognize the "top cat."

Cats climb trees in nature and lounge on the branches, so this instinct must be satisfied, too. Comfortable, accessible bedding in a quiet location will encourage the cat to sleep in his own quarters, but cats do like to sun themselves on the back of the best chair in the house.

"Safe climbing alternatives and scratching posts will help deter destruction of furniture."

Safe climbing alternatives and scratching posts will help deter destruction of furniture. One important rule of thumb is that each cat is different; you must choose the types of play and toys that are most appealing to your cat and most appropriate for your household. Try cat trees and scratching toys and posts with different types of materials and surfaces so you learn what your cat likes to climb and scratch. By providing a surface he likes and teaching him where it is appropriate to scratch, you can prevent inappropriate scratching before it begins.

What should I do if I have other pets?

Some kittens not only face a new home, they also face a new family that includes other pets as well as humans. Some kittens may show fear and defensive postures toward other pets in the home, but most young kittens are simply playful and inquisitive around other animals. In fact, existing pets that have an established territorial instinct for the home may pose more of an aggressive problem than the new kitty. If you know or suspect that your dog or cat might be aggressive toward the kitten, choreograph their introduction with safety in mind.

Keep your cat or dog on a leash or have someone hold them when introducing the new kitten. Allow the pets to explore each other and intervene only if you detect signs of impending aggression. Usually, gently correcting inappropriate behavior on the part of the new or existing pet and reinforcing desired responses will diffuse the situation, but be prepared to use the leash and retreat quickly if tensions escalate.

Planning ahead will make the introduction of the new kitten easier. Review training commands with your dog. Ask him to sit and stay if either he or the kitty becomes agitated during the introduction. Have him on a leash in case a hasty retreat is necessary. Resident cats may not respond to voice commands, but they can be placed on a leash/harness for quick avoidance of dangerous behavior.



The presence of other pets in the house makes confining the kitten to a restricted area even more important for two reasons. First, the kitten needs personal space where he feels safe and secure. Second, the new kitten should not intrude on the personal space already claimed by the existing pets. Feeding and sleeping should be in separate locations, at least for a while. With time, both the new kitten and your other pets will learn the other's behavior patterns and signals while developing mutual respect and trust. When this happens, anxiety levels are decreased on both sides. Until then, the new kitten needs a place to avoid confrontation by climbing or hiding to remove himself from the situation.

If the existing pet is an adult cat instead of a dog, there may not be as much difficulty for the new kitten. Most adult cats are fairly tolerant of kittens as long as their territory is respected and they don't feel neglected. It's important to spend quality time with both the new and the resident cat. In fact, during the transition period it is a good idea to spend *extra* time with the older cat. In addition to avoiding competition for attention, you must deter competition for food. If you follow the plan to provide the new cat with his own eating area, this should not be a problem, but monitor the older cat's bowl to ensure that the new kitty doesn't eat from it.

The introduction period will usually last one to two weeks and will have one of three possible outcomes:

- **The existing cat will remain hostile to the kitten.** This is an unlikely occurrence if competition for food and affection are minimized during the first few weeks.

- **The existing cat will only tolerate the kitten.** Hostility will cease, but the existing cat will act as if the kitten is not present. This is more likely if the existing cat is very independent, has been an only cat for several years, or if marked competition occurred during the first few weeks. This relationship may be permanent no matter how friendly the kitten is, but it is not usually harmful.
- **Bonding will occur between the existing cat and the kitten.** They will play together, groom each other, and sleep near each other. This is more likely to occur if competition is minimized and if the existing cat has been lonely for companionship.

How can I help my kitten enjoy physical contact?

Depending on his personality and early experiences as a kitten, your cat may either enjoy or dislike certain types of handling. In order for the cat to learn to accept and enjoy physical contact from people, it is critical that the human hand *only* be associated with positive experiences and that all physical punishment is avoided.

Begin with those types of handling that the cat enjoys like scratching him behind the ears. Speak to him in a kind voice while petting him. For reluctant cats, you may consider giving a treat during the petting sessions. This technique can be applied to other types of handling and can help the cat become accustomed to, and perhaps eventually enjoy, petting, grooming, teeth brushing, nail trimming, and even bathing.

How can I help my cat accept the carrier?

You probably got off to a good start with the pet carrier by following the recommendations for bringing your new kitty home. Continued crate training will come in handy over the kitty's lifetime. There will be trips to the veterinarian or vacation travel or times of home confinement (e.g. allergic guests, contractors coming and going, etc.) that require short stays inside the pet carrier.

To foster positive feelings about the pet carrier, start by leaving the carrier in the cat's feeding quarters with the door open. Place toys or his food bowl inside the carrier to entice him inside. A pleasant experience and the freedom to come and go as he pleases will give your cat a better view of the carrier.

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After he becomes comfortable entering and leaving the carrier of his own accord, close the door briefly while he is inside. Each time, try to leave the kitten in a bit longer before allowing him to exit. Contrary to your instincts, never allow the kitten out when he cries or scratches at the crate or he will associate those behaviors with escape. Instead, wait until the kitten is calm and quiet, praise him and allow him to exit.

Take a short car ride with the cat in the carrier with a destination other than the veterinary hospital. No need for the cat to always associate the carrier with medical care! With a little patience, you can help your cat regard the carrier as a safe haven rather than a prison. Feliway® might help some cats to more quickly adapt to their carrier (see Crate Training and Travel).

How do I deal with inappropriate behavior?

Cats can be demanding creatures so it's important to instill good manners early on. Inappropriate behavior such as swatting, excessive vocalization, and biting should not be tolerated. If your kitten begins to exhibit these behaviors, quickly and quietly leave the area and cease all interactions. Once the kitten is calm and quiet, resume interactions. The goal is for the kitten to learn that calm, quiet behavior warrants attention while aggressive actions do not. Make time daily for appropriate interactions with your cat that include play and petting.

Disciplining a young kitten may be necessary if its behavior towards people or property is inappropriate, but harsh punishment should be avoided. A sharp, "No!" may be all that is needed to stop your kitty in his tracks. However, remote punishment that associates the consequences with the *action* instead of the person is preferred. For most kittens, hand clapping or rattling a can of beans can divert attention and be intimidating enough to inhibit undesirable behavior when you are present.

How do I ensure that my cat is well socialized?

The prime socialization period for cats occurs between two and twelve weeks of age, so much of the cat's socialization will have taken place while he is still with his mother and siblings. During that time, the kitten is very impressionable. If he has good experiences with people, dogs, or other cats, he will likely continue to accept them. If he has no experience at all, or unpleasant experiences with any of them, he may become apprehensive or adverse to them. Therefore, during the period of socialization, we encourage you to expose your cat to as many types of social situations and influences as possible. Use positive reinforcement and make your kitty feel secure during the introduction of any new experience.

With a little work and patience, you will quickly become your new kitty's best friend and hopefully, you will gain a great friend, too.

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