

Behavior & Training

Behavior Resources



Raising Well Behaved Kittens

Like small children, kittens have a seemingly endless amount of energy and a tendency toward getting into trouble. They'll race around the room, pounce on things that move, such as your feet, and shimmy up the curtains in the blink of an eye. And, like any child, they are an endless source of joy. With proper direction, you can channel that bountiful energy and avert disasters.

The two main complaints we hear about kittens are **biting** and **not sleeping through the night**. The best fix for both is to put your kitten on a routine schedule for food, sleep and play. And, the top behavioral intervention is to provide positive reinforcement for the behavior you want in your home and ignore or redirect the behavior you don't.

LOVE BITES—NO SUCH THING

Let's be clear: It is not appropriate or acceptable at any time for a cat or kitten to bite you. Kittens explore their world with their mouths. It is natural and normal. However, when one kitten bites another too hard, she is told in cat language, "That hurts. Stop!" It's not tolerated in the cat world and should not be tolerated by you. Also, a kitten that bites can grow into an aggressive adult, creating problems down the road. If a kitten puts his teeth on you, make a high pitched squeak and immediately stop playing and leave the room for a few minutes. Any attention is rewarding to a young kitten. It is important that this behavior not be rewarded.

Signs of Overstimulation

When petting your kitten, watch her tail and ears. If her tail is lashing and she flicks or pulls back her ears, she is getting over-stimulated. Stop petting her and either stand up and walk away, therefore removing the stimulus, or redirect her energy with a stuffed animal or other toy.

If you have younger children especially, do not let them play with the kitten using their hand as a toy. When they do that, they are giving the kitten permission to bite. Supervise your child when they play with the kitten. If cats feel pinned down for any reason, their first reaction is to flee. If prevented by an enthusiastic child, a kitten may try to scramble away using his claws and mouth, causing injury. Provide children with a variety of wand toys. This will set both them and the kittens up for a successful play session.

Biting the Hand That Feeds—The Redirecting Technique

Kittens are hard-wired to go after moving objects. Fluffy doesn't yet know you are providing meals, so she is "practicing" catching her prey. Unfortunately, your prey may be your toes. Get smart and put a toy mouse or other fun object in your pocket. As you walk to the kitchen at the appointed windows of time, you can toss a toy across her path and distract her. If the entire family practices this redirection technique, the kitten should stop pouncing.

Remember that you are trying to teach your kitten you are the beneficent boss. Don't give in easily to his vocal demands for food. Through play, you can teach him to be patient. Toss him a Ping-Pong ball while you have your toast. When he stops meowing, give him his breakfast and stroke him, rewarding his good behavior.

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SETTING YOUR KITTEN'S CLOCK

When You're Away, the Cat Will Play and Play and Play

Keeping your kitten active during the day will help her—and you—sleep through the night. It is normal for a kitten to explore her world, so use this to your advantage and help her hone her hunting and social skills. Create a jungle-gym with cat-trees, boxes and/or paper bags (handles removed) for your kitten to play with while you are away at work. There are also motion-detection toys and DVDs on the market that kittens can find intriguing. You also might consider getting him or her a playmate of a similar age so they can amuse each other. Two indoor kittens are usually the best adjusted and get into less mischief.

Beware that, while you are gone, awkward kittens will want to jump onto furniture. And these clumsy little guys sometimes don't have a great sense of perspective: They might jump and miss, scrambling up the high-end speakers with their small, needle-sharp claws. Keep your kitten's claws clipped to avoid his pulling down a table runner and all your nice art onto the floor. It's wise to kitten-proof your home—e.g. getting rid of dangling objects, stabilizing tipsy tables with delicate objects on them, etc.

For when you get home—pets do, after all, have an uncanny ability to know you're about to walk in - keep a couple of balls or mice near the door. As you enter, you can toss your little pal a toy and once again redirect his predatory urges.

Night Moves—The “Play Till He Drops” method

Your kitten will be so happy that you're home. Show him you love him by scheduling some “hunting time” before bedtime. It can be fun and help you both wind down for the night. Tire him out with a feathery cat wand, for instance. He'll have a ball jumping, rolling and swatting. (Watch out that he doesn't go too wild, though, and knock over a Ming vase!)

To signal the end of playtime, let him catch the toy, then feed him a snack. This teaches him that it's time to chill. Before bedtime, feed him dinner. With a full belly after a workout, kittens will sleep longer.

People love to adopt kittens because of their exuberant life force. With the above techniques, your “crazy” kitty should learn the fine line between aggression and what's OK in play