

Overcoming common behavior problems in kittens



You're probably not naïve enough to think that when you welcome a new kitten into your home, all will be bliss with the adorable ball of fur. But a kitten can develop habits even more destructive than you think if you don't know how to curb bad behavior. Good news! By working with your veterinarian, you can eliminate or even prevent many kitten behavior problems. Here are some common challenges and the steps you can take to lick 'em.

Inappropriate perches

Although young kittens may not be able to successfully complete high vertical jumps, their acrobatic abilities grow tremendously in the first few months, so you may find your kitten perched in unusual and perhaps undesirable places. It's normal for kittens to explore their environment and perch on high surfaces. By using the vertical space, kittens increase the relative size of their home environments and their ability to survey activity.

If you want to teach your kitten to stay off kitchen counters and dining room tables, first you must provide alternative vertical perches. Try placing a commercial scratching post or shelving near off-limit surfaces, and encourage your kitten to use the acceptable perches by playing with your kitten on or near the perches, feeding treats on them, and praising your kitten when it uses the perches.

Next, make the unacceptable surfaces undesirable. It is best to have something that does not require your activation, because unless you are extremely covert in delivering a negative consequence (*e.g.* squirting the kitten with water), the kitten may just learn not to jump on that surface when you are watching. Try placing double-stick tape, a motion-detector-type alarm, a pad that delivers a small electrical shock when touched (Scat Mat—Contech Electronics), or some other sort of device that ensures a negative consequence is delivered regardless of your presence. In addition, do not tempt your kitten onto counters or tables by leaving attractive items on them such as food, flowers, or plants.

The nighttime circus

Does your new kitten exhibit a burst of nighttime activity, leaving you with little sleep? This is a common complaint

among kitten owners. Many kittens don't get a great deal of exercise or activity during the day. While you are at work, they spend the day sleeping. And in the evening, you may enjoy curling up on the sofa with your new companion. Thus, all that kitten energy explodes in the wee hours of the morning. To manage this problem, you need to channel your kitten's energy into activities when you are awake. A kitten that is kept awake all evening with games or chasing toys is much less likely to get into mischief in the middle of the night.

Make sure you don't scream at your kitten or chase it when it exhibits this behavior. This only encourages the activity. If you can't ignore the behavior, you can deliver a remote punishment (*e.g.* a squirt of water). Of course, closing the bedroom door or slipping in some earplugs may help to ensure a full night's slumber.

Also, do not get up and feed your kitten when it exhibits this activity. It will quickly learn that awakening you reaps great rewards, and if you try to stop this behavior, your kitten will often become more persistent. Consistent disregard on your part will eventually extinguish this behavior.

Another fine mess...

Although they may weigh less than 5 lb, kittens can inflict substantial property damage in a relatively short time. Their main weapons of destruction are their front claws, although some kittens also chew items.

Scratching is normal and provides many benefits to cats—it stretches their muscles, leaves a scent and a visual mark, and grooms their nail beds. Cats are going to scratch. The key to successful management is to target the scratching at acceptable items in prominent locations. These scratching structures should be sturdy, either horizontal or vertical (depending on what your kitten likes), and made from materials that your kitten favors. To find out what your kitten prefers, you can offer a variety of choices or mimic the shape and materials of unacceptable targets. You also must make unacceptable targets aversive (*e.g.* place double-stick tape or aluminum foil on them) or unavailable. Trim your kitten's nails weekly to

Continued

keep its nails blunt. For difficult cases, consider soft rubber nail caps that are applied monthly (Soft Paws—Soft Paws, Inc., Three Rivers, Calif.) or declawing.

Although it is less common, some kittens chew household items, especially stringlike objects or plants. Just as you childproof a house, you need to kitten-proof. Keep plants out of reach. Unplug cords or place them out of reach, too. A protective covering for cords that can't be removed from the environment can be found at home improvement stores. A remote punishment may be effective; consider coating target items with an unpleasant material such as a commercial deterrent spray or bittering agent or attaching a motion alarm. It is important to provide acceptable items to chew: a small pot of wheat grass or a rawhide chew bone may help. Playing with fishing-pole-type toys will tire the kitten and provide an appropriate outlet for oral activity.

Not all fun and games

Cats, especially kittens, need appropriate outlets for play. If these needs aren't met, cats will sometimes use their owners as play targets. If your kitten becomes too excited or aroused, it may injure you. Overexuberant play behavior toward another pet in the household may also result in problems.

Cats that exhibit play-related aggression need to have appropriate daily interactive play with remote toys. Initiate these play periods, and avoid any activity that results in your body being the target of the play. Try to anticipate such an attack, and redirect it onto a toy (*e.g.* carry a ball to toss). Avoid giving any type of reward for the play aggression—running and screaming may only encourage the behavior. Do not deliver any direct interactive punishment (*e.g.* don't hit the cat), because it may induce fear or defensive aggression. You can interrupt inappropriate play behavior by providing remote punishment (*e.g.* using a squirt bottle or an alarm) or leaving the room if the cat instigates inappropriate play. Adding another cat of a similar age and energy level to your household is also an option.

Litter-box basics

One of the joys of owning a kitten is that housetraining is usually much easier in cats than in dogs. Most kittens are

naturally attracted to a litter box for elimination. Problems tend to arise when the litter box isn't accessible, clean, or attractive. And sometimes a kitten discovers alternative, equally attractive elimination spots such as the dirt in a potted plant. It is easier to avoid a litter-box problem than to fix it.

Most cats prefer finely particulate material to eliminate on, and clumping-type litters provide this type of surface. Cats generally prefer unscented litters. A litter box can't be too clean—daily scooping and routine washing with soap and water are mandatory. Uncovered boxes are recommended, since covered boxes tend to trap odor, and you may scoop less often if you cannot readily see the deposits. In a multicat household, there should be one more box than there are cats. So in a household with three cats, there should be four litter boxes.

Social relationships with other home inhabitants may cause litter-box access problems. For example, a kitten may be unwilling to cross the path of a household dog or another cat to get to the box. Or perhaps you have a young child who likes to grab the kitten while it is in the litter box, making the kitten reluctant to use the box again. You must identify and address these social problem situations.

In addition, make sure you place the litter box near your kitten's core living area so the kitten can easily access it. Expecting a young kitten to crawl down two flights of stairs to reach the litter box may be setting the kitten up for failure. In addition, make sure the kitten fits the box. A small kitten should not be expected to scale a high-sided box. And as the kitten grows, the litter box must reflect the kitten's need for more space.

Some kittens need to be restricted to a smaller area with a litter box until usage patterns are successfully established. Of course, if a kitten has a medical problem that causes increased urgency or frequency of elimination, you should see your veterinarian. ■

Information provided by Jacqui Neilson, DVM, Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists, Animal Behavior Clinic, 809 S.E. Powell Blvd., Portland, OR 97202.