

SOCIALIZING CATS

The word “socialization” has several meanings. When we talk about a “well socialized cat” we mean a cat that isn’t afraid of everyday events, can be friendly toward unfamiliar individuals, is easy to handle, gets along well with other cats, people, dogs, and other species, and can adjust relatively easily to change in confident ways without becoming fearful or threatening.

When we talk about “socializing a cat,” we mean giving the cat pleasant experiences, starting during kittenhood, with events, objects, and individuals he is likely to encounter throughout life. These experiences help the cat meet the above description of being well socialized.

In the scientific literature, “socialization” in its most basic sense means the formation of attachments between individuals.

A Sensitive Period for Socialization

During a period of time when kittens are very young, they are very open to new experiences. They aren’t afraid of the unfamiliar and will usually approach new objects, animals and people with friendliness and curiosity. This window of time is called the sensitive period for socialization and in cats occurs between two and seven weeks of age. Socialization occurs quite readily because of the kitten’s general lack of fear.

As kittens mature, it’s normal for them to become increasingly cautious about anything unfamiliar. This increased reluctance to approach what they don’t know is what limits the sensitive period for socialization.

The capability for socialization doesn’t end with the end of this sensitive period, but the older a cat is when first exposed to new things, the harder it is for him to adjust. Cats that have only limited experience with the world in general during kittenhood may always have difficulty accepting changes and anything different.

Feral Cats and Kittens

By definition, a feral animal is a domesticated animal that has returned to a wild existence. Feral animals may differ not only in appearance and behavior from their domesticated counterparts, but genetically as well.

Investigating something unfamiliar, such as a new piece of furniture, may pose little risk for a domestic house cat, but for feral and wild animals, what you don’t know can hurt you. Many wild and feral animals are neophobic (afraid of anything new), because it is to their benefit to be so.

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Socialization doesn't end with adulthood, but adult cats require more effort.

The key is that socialization must be enjoyable rather than fear producing.

Rescued feral cats are unlikely to become as friendly and confident as a well socialized house cat. Unless rescued and socialized during the sensitive period, feral kittens may always be skittish, fearful, and difficult to handle. Although no research has been done on the subject, it would make sense that with early socialization, a first generation feral kitten would have a better chance at becoming a friendly, confident house cat than would a kitten from several generations of feral ancestors.

How To Socialize Your Kitten

Remember that socialization can mean giving your cat pleasant experiences with a wide variety of objects, events, people, and other animals he is likely to encounter as an adult. Typical socialization experiences could include car rides, introductions to a crate, being brushed or taken to the grooming salon, playing gently with children, taken next door to the neighbor's for a visit, trips to the veterinary clinic, and meeting friendly cats and cat-tolerant dogs.

The key is that these experiences must be enjoyable rather than fear producing. So socialization trips to the grooming salon or veterinarian won't include a bath or vaccinations, but just exposure to the facility and staff.

Socialization experiences can be made enjoyable through the use of tasty treats, exciting toys, and gentle petting and massage. The greater the number of positive experiences your kitten has, the less likely a negative experience will have an adverse impact on him.

Allow your kitten to experience things at his own pace. Avoid forcing him to approach or deal with something that frightens him. Instead, find a way to make things easier or less intense for him.

For example, to help a kitten become accustomed to riding in the car, start with feeding your kitten a few tasty treats while he sits in the car on several occasions. Next you might want to let the car idle in the driveway while your kitten eats his treats to allow him to become accustomed to engine noises and vibrations. Several short trips around the neighborhood might be next.

Most cats grow up despising carriers and car rides because an unpleasant experience always awaits at the end of the trip, usually the veterinarian or grooming salon. You can avoid this through proper socialization. Accustom your kitten to car rides as explained above.

Leave your kitten's carrier out where she can explore it and become familiar with it. Put her in the carrier for a brief car ride. Many car rides in her carrier should be either brief trips around the neighborhood, or for socialization visits to the boarding kennel, veterinarian, or groomer.

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Adult socialization can help your cat lead a more relaxed and less stressful life.

Make a list of things that your kitten will encounter throughout his lifetime, such as different sounds, surfaces, objects, people, animals, and situations. Create enjoyable socialization opportunities to these stimuli.

While still relatively rare, a few veterinary clinics are offering kitten socialization classes, similar to puppy classes. These classes provide structured, managed socialization opportunities, as well as provide information about cat behavior that allows you to be a better “cat parent.”

Socializing an Adult Cat

The process of socializing an adult cat is not much different than socializing a kitten. The difference is that the process may require significantly more time and much smaller steps. If your cat wasn't well socialized as a kitten, there may be definite limits as to how far your cat can go toward become a friendly, tolerant, well adjusted animal. Remedial socialization however is always worth doing because chances are you can help your cat live a more relaxed and less stressful life. You'll likely be using counter conditioning and desensitization techniques that are described in the Pamphlet for Pet Parents by the same name.

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