

## Socializing kittens under 8 weeks old

Working with kittens is fun AND valuable! Socialization is the process of preparing a pet to enjoy interactions and be comfortable with people, places, activities and other animals. *Positively* exposing a pet to as many different things as possible when they are young means they will be less fearful, and puts them on the path to become happy, well-adjusted adults.



## The importance of family

Kittens learn A LOT from their family. If they are separated from their mothers or littermates too early, they are more likely to exhibit problem behaviours (such as fearfulness or aggression) later in life. Kittens should be kept with their family until they are of age for adoption, if possible.

If mom and kittens are found outside:

- **Mom enjoys human contact:** Bring them into your home and socialize them there!
- **Mom does not enjoy human contact, and it is safe to leave them where you found them:** Leave them where they are – being brought into your home is likely to be very stressful for mom. Provide food for mom, and complete only the socialization activities that mom is comfortable with. Learning from mom is most important; don't risk her moving the kittens somewhere more secluded or the kittens learning that you are a threat by watching how mom responds to you!
- **Mom does not enjoy human contact, and it is not safe to leave them where they are:** House mom and kittens in a large dog crate in a quiet spot in your home. To make mom's experience as low stress as possible, pair your presence with special treats that she only gets in your presence, speak to her gently from a distance she perceives as safe, avoid sustained eye contact, keep movements slow, and do not force physical interaction.

## Neonatal Period: Kittens 0-2 weeks old

Kittens cannot see, hear, or regulate their own body temperature. Their only priority is to eat and keep warm. Their mom takes care of all of this for them. Trust helps them to survive so fear has not yet developed.



### Socialization exercises

- Not necessary during this period, but this is a GREAT time to work on your relationship with mom! Teach her to associate your presence with things she likes, such as tasty rewards that she only gets in your presence or play.

## Socialization period: Kittens 3-7 weeks old

Senses and mobility slowly develop. Their priority is to be curious about new things, bond with individuals, and learn what sounds, sights, and smells are safe. Fear starts to develop, but they recover quickly. Positive exposure to new things during this period leads to a positive association to these things later in life.



### Socialization exercises

- Gradually increase exposure to things they are likely to encounter in regular life:
  - Being held by a variety of people (men/women, adults/children)
  - Common noises (e.g., vacuum cleaners, TVs, telephones)
  - Other cats or even dogs (if this can be done safely)
  - Going outdoors (in a carrier or on a leash)
  - Brushing



- Give mock veterinary exams
  - Practice touching and examining the ears, the rear end, holding them on their side, and looking in their mouth
  - If there are elements of the exam your kitten does not like, break that section down into smaller parts and work on building up gradually



- Nail trims
  - Lay your kitten on his back and touch his feet while feeding treats
  - Tap his claws with the trimmers while feeding treats
  - Trim a few nails while feeding treats – be careful to avoid the quick



ALWAYS create a good association with each of these activities by pairing them with something they like.

NEVER proceed if your kitten shows signs of feline fear, anxiety, and stress, (including hissing/growling, wide eyes/dilated pupils, withdrawal/ hiding, tense posture, and flattened ears). If your kitten has a negative reaction to any of these activities, break the activity into smaller parts and give treats after each part.

## Later development period: Kittens 8 weeks & up

At this age kittens rely much less on mom, so fear becomes much more important to their survival. During this period (which lasts for the rest of their life) it becomes much more difficult for them to form positive associations with new things. If you are attempting to socialize a cat above this age, please see the THS Behaviour Info Sheet on “Socializing kittens above 8 weeks old”.

For additional information or tips on managing this behaviour in your home, please contact the Training Department at [training@torontohumanesociety.com](mailto:training@torontohumanesociety.com) or (416) 392-2273 ext.2145

**\*Note:** Much of this information and many of the images in this manual are taken from *Low Stress Handling, Restraint and Behavior Modification of Dogs and Cats* by Dr. Sophia Yin DVM.

Dr. Yin was a pioneer in the field of animal behaviour and stress-free handling methods. She took her own life in 2014. Her tragic death was a wake-up call to the veterinary community and has resulted in greater awareness of stress and depression in the profession. We honour her memory by continuing her legacy of compassionate animal handling.

For more information or other resources please visit <https://drsophiayin.com/>