



# Supplementary guidance for cat breeders on the socialisation of kittens

## **About:**

This guidance should be read in conjunction with the **Responsible Cat Breeding Guidelines**. It applies to all those keeping cats for breeding and should help breeders meet their duty of care responsibilities. Breeders should ensure kittens have a good start in life – they are well socialised and behaviourally healthy – so that they can fulfil their potential to live a good quality of life in their new homes.

Competent authorities and inspecting veterinarians, may wish to use this guidance to verify whether breeders are keeping kittens in suitable environments, which provide them with experiences, to promote their behavioural development and safeguard their welfare.

Breeders should regularly update their knowledge to keep pace with developments and where available, seek expert advice from a certified veterinary behaviourist or applied animal behaviourist. Reputable behaviourists may be accessed via veterinarians or other professional associations.

## **Suggested review of the guidelines:**

To keep pace with the evidence-base that underpins best practice for responsible breeding and care of kittens and cats, the content of these supplementary guidelines should be reviewed in three years (2025) or earlier if necessary. For updates and more information view: **Eurogroup for Animals Cats & Dogs**.



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## 1. Introduction

For kittens to make happy confident pets, they must have positive, frequent, and varied experiences with people, other animals, and the domestic home environment during their development.

Kitten development begins in utero. The way queens are kept and cared for and consequently their welfare state during pregnancy has a long-term influence on kitten development into adulthood.

Kittens are particularly sensitive to learning about their environment, relationships with people and other cats when they are very young (socialisation period: 2-7weeks of age). Learning about social relationships with other cats, through interaction (particularly play) continues until kittens are approximately 4-5 months of age.

Without the right type of experiences during this sensitive period, kittens may never be fully comfortable living as a pet cat.

Ideally, kittens should not be separated from queens until they are fully weaned and not before they are 8 weeks of age<sup>1</sup> (unless veterinary advice suggests otherwise). Early social separation (< 8 weeks old) during development is associated with increased risk of developing aggressive behaviour as adults, resulting in a reduced quality of life. Delaying weaning until later (> 12 weeks) may reduce the probability of displaying anxious or stereotypic behaviour in adulthood (Ahola et al 2017; Berg et al 2018).

It is of critical importance that breeders take responsibility for positively shaping the early experience of kittens to prepare the kittens for life in a home environment.

This document provides supplementary guidance on providing kittens with the right types of experience they need to become confident adult cats that can happily live with people in a home environment.

## 2. Kitten development

Kittens grow rapidly through relatively short periods of development, characterised below by kitten age, and the appearance of physical and behavioural milestones (Table 1). The timings of these milestones vary between individuals in the same litter, influenced by breed, genetics, sex, maternal and environmental factors that give rise to considerable variation between litters.

There are four periods of kitten development (Table 1): The prenatal period (before birth, gestation: 63 days – range: 58-72 days); the neonatal period (birth-to-2-weeks); the socialisation period (2-to-7/8 weeks); and the juvenile period (8 weeks-to-sexual maturity).

Identifying and understanding each of the stages of development can help to guide the timing of the different types of experiences necessary to prepare kittens for life in a home environment, to ensure kittens grow into happy confident pets.

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<sup>1</sup> [Responsible Cat Breeding Guidelines](#) (2020).



**Table 1** Overview of the stages of kitten development from birth to adolescence<sup>2</sup>

Development stages		
Neonatal: birth-to-2 weeks	Socialisation: 2-to-7/8 weeks	Juvenile: 8 weeks-to-sexual maturity (adulthood)
Sensory, physical & behavioural milestones		
<p><b>Born completely dependent on their mother:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Kittens are born blind and virtually deaf, unable to control their own body temperature &amp; cannot toilet independently.</li> <li>- Kittens are sensitive to touch, pain, and temperature; they can detect certain odours and taste.</li> <li>- Kittens can lift their head &amp; 'right' themselves, but movement is limited to 'wriggling' short distances.</li> <li>- Time is mostly spent sleeping &amp; nursing.</li> <li>- Eyes &amp; ears gradually open from 6 days of age (eyes) &amp; 14 days of age (ears).</li> </ul>	<p><b>Rapid learning facilitated by maturation of sensory and physical capabilities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Kitten brain growth is rapid up to 8 weeks of age.</li> <li>- Senses are developed and fully functional by 7 weeks of age.</li> <li>- Learning rapidly increases through experience – kittens associate social and non-social objects with positive or negative emotions.</li> <li>- Toileting increasingly comes under voluntary control by 3-4 weeks of age.</li> <li>- Kittens can thermoregulate by 7 weeks of age.</li> <li>- First kitten teeth appear by 3-4 weeks of age.</li> <li>- Weaning starts at 3-4 weeks of age &amp; completes by 8 weeks of age.</li> <li>- Kittens begin to crawl forwards &amp; backward, start to stand and perform simple walking movements. By week 7 the kitten appears fully coordinated.</li> <li>- Kittens start to interact with one another from 2 weeks of age, and by 7 of age weeks distinct play behaviours (social vs. object) are well developed.</li> <li>- Social skills towards other animals develop.</li> <li>- Kittens are particularly sensitive to human contact and new experiences.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Continued physical growth and consolidation of social learning:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Kittens grow &amp; refine their motor skills.</li> <li>- Kitten teeth are lost from 14-16 weeks of age &amp; all adult teeth appear by 24 weeks of age.</li> <li>- Kitten-kitten play starts to decline from 14 weeks of age, but its' performance remains important until 4-5 months of age.</li> <li>- Exploration continues and object-directed play increases.</li> <li>- Onset of sexual maturity is variable and may be influenced by breed and other factors.</li> <li>- Females may come into oestrus from 4 months of age and spermatogenesis may be observed in males from 5 months of age.</li> <li>- Cats are not fully grown until they have reached skeletal maturity, much later than sexual maturity.</li> </ul>

<sup>2</sup> Information summarised from: Crowell-Davis 2007; McCune 2010; Landsberg et al 2012; Bateson 2014; Bradshaw 2017.



## 2.1. Sensitive period for socialisation

For a short period of time during their development, kittens are particularly sensitive to learning about the environment in which they live, which includes other animals, people, sounds, sights, and objects that they will encounter in later life. During this short window (from 2-7 weeks of age), known as the socialisation period, the kitten's brain is developing at a rapid rate (Zambelli 2012; Bateson 2014). What the kitten learns about their environment, through experience, forms associations in the brain, and this has long term consequences for their behavioural development into adulthood. Kittens are particularly receptive to experiences that they find positive, learning to accept them as 'normal', non-threatening and rewarding. They are equally sensitive to negative experiences, learning to avoid anything they find frightening or painful. Towards the end of the socialisation period, the kitten's brain becomes less sensitive to forming new associations; accepting new encounters after this time becomes increasingly more difficult.

Providing kittens' positive experiences with other animals, people, and the household environment during the sensitive period helps teach them to accept living in a home with people as 'normal'. Kittens that have been socialised<sup>3</sup> (with people and other animals) and habituated<sup>4</sup> (to the household environment) develop into confident, friendly adults that can cope with future challenges. However, kittens who have had negative experiences or no experience at all with people and the household environment during the sensitive window for socialisation will not make suitable pets, as they do not cope with living with people in a home environment.

Cats do not have an innate need to be with humans, instead they *learn to live with humans* (Kotrshcal et al 2014); when provided with the right opportunities to experience people early in life, they can form close and friendly relationships with them. Learning about humans happens most efficiently and predictably through regular interaction during the sensitive period (Lowe & Bradshaw 2002). Indeed, research has demonstrated that kittens aged 2-7 weeks, that are handled for 30-40 minutes a day were more confident around people than their unhandled counterparts. Similarly, if kittens are handled by more than one person, this further increases the kitten's confidence around strangers (reviewed by Landsberg et al 2012). It is recommended that kittens are socialised with people when they are 2-7 weeks of age; the more opportunities the kitten has for positive human handling, the more confident they are likely to be around people (Landsberg et al 2012). It is important to continue to interact with kittens regularly and positively into adulthood as this will help reinforce and generalise what they have learnt.

Whilst socialisation refers to the process by which kittens learn how to interact with others (animals and people), they must also learn that a variety of sounds, sights and objects present in a home are non-threatening. This type of learning is known as habituation and it describes the process of familiarisation, where kittens 'get used' (stop reacting over time) to the different aspects of the environment which they encounter in daily life. Whilst this process happens naturally in a home environment, in a breeding establishment breeders must give kittens regular experience of all the different aspects the kitten will typically encounter when in a home.

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<sup>3</sup> Socialisation is the process by which an animal learns how to interact with other cats, animals, and people, and they develop appropriate social behaviour towards others.

<sup>4</sup> Habituation describes the waning of a response with time when the kitten repeatedly experiences a stimulus. This kind of learning is important for familiarising a kitten with aspects of its care and the environment which are non-threatening, to which it is not expected to react (e.g., typical household sounds such as the radio or television).

### 3. Guidance on socialisation and early experiences

#### 3.1 General guidance<sup>5</sup>

Breeders should have a socialisation and habituation plan (e.g., Table 2) in place and incorporate it into daily care routines to ensure kittens are adequately exposed to the right experiences early on. Section 3.2. provides further detail on timetabling of different experiences throughout the kitten's development (see Table 2).

- The plan should be appropriate to each kitten's age, stage of behavioural development and individual needs.
- The plan should help to guide and keep track of what to do and when, so that kittens are adequately socialised (Table 2, Section 3.2).
- Use appropriate infection control and safety measures<sup>6</sup> when introducing kittens to new experiences.

Ensure that the queen and her kittens can cope with interactions

- The breeder should establish a positive and trusting relationship with the queen prior to kitting, to facilitate socialisation and habituation of young kittens to people and the home.
- Kittens are more confident during socialisation and habituation in the presence of their littermates and the queen.
- Kittens can become overwhelmed when they are exposed to too many things too quickly.
- Start interactions slowly and gradually allow kittens to interact at their own pace.
- The behavioural response of the kitten<sup>7</sup> should guide interactions. Ideally, the kitten's response and progress should be recorded in the plan and a copy of the plan should be provided to new owners at rehoming.
- Kittens should not continue to be exposed to aspects they find fearful on the assumption that they will 'get used to it'<sup>8</sup>. Instead, kittens should be desensitised<sup>9</sup> to aspects they may initially find frightening.

Regularly and appropriately handle kittens to habituate them to different types of handling and to socialise them with people.

- Handle each kitten gently for short periods of time initially, gradually increasing the duration and type of handling as the kitten ages.
- Handling should include stroking the kitten in preferred areas around the face, head and along the back.
- These positive interactions should be interspersed with picking the kitten up and examining its eyes, ears, feet and underneath the tail - the types of handling that are critical for providing good animal care in the future.
- Handling must not be prolonged if the kitten is distressed.
- Young kittens (up to 2 weeks of age) should be handled by the breeder/main caretaker, as they age (from 2 weeks), kittens should be gradually introduced to new people.

<sup>5</sup> [Responsible Cat Breeding Guidelines](#) (2020).

<sup>6</sup> Outlined in the [Responsible Cat Breeding Guidelines](#) (2020).

<sup>7</sup> Dr Sophia Yin: [Body Language of feline anxiety poster](#); RSPCA [Understanding cat behaviour](#).

<sup>8</sup> Flooding describes methods or situations that provoke extreme fear from which the animal has no escape which may lead to panic. For example, a highly fearful cat restrained for veterinary examination. This experience reinforces the experience of fear during veterinary visits. THIS METHOD MUST NEVER BE USED.

<sup>9</sup> In this instance, desensitisation refers to the systematic pairing of a positive reward directly with an uncomfortable experience to reduce any associated fear or anxiety. This usually starts at a lower intensity so that it does not induce any fear, gradually increasing intensity within limits that the animal can cope with. An example would be playing a socialisation soundtrack at low volume every time kittens are fed, and gradually increasing the volume over several weeks so that kittens can experience the 'sound' of a vacuum cleaner at its natural volume without reacting fearfully to the sound.



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- Kittens should be handled by at least 5 different types of people, including adults (males and females of different ages and appearance) and (supervised) children of different ages.
- Veterinary advice should be sought on the appropriate biosecurity measures<sup>10</sup> to be followed by new people entering the facility during this time.
- Handle each kitten frequently throughout the day.
- Kittens who receive total daily handling between 30-40 minutes - 1 hour a day are likely to be more confident when handled; handling periods should occur little and often throughout the day.

Provide kittens with enough litter trays containing different types of litter, so that they do not develop strong preferences for a single litter type or inappropriate toileting substrates (e.g., carpet).

Gradually habituate kittens to different textures, sounds and sights they are likely to encounter in households (e.g., appliances, televisions, washing machines and different surfaces on which to walk).

- Coupling these experiences with rewards such as food, stroking and play will help kittens form positive associations.

Gradually introduce kittens to a cat carrier prior to transport before homing

- Provide kittens with repeated opportunities to explore and enter the cat carrier voluntarily.
- Place bedding impregnated with their familiar scent in the bottom of the carrier and encourage kittens to explore further by offering food inside the carrier.
- Slowly build-up positive associations with the cat carrier; kittens must be fully comfortable entering and resting in the carrier on their own before being fully enclosed.

Carefully and gradually introduce kittens to other animals (e.g., adult cats and dogs) if they share the same household.

- Introductions should be staged. Start by providing kittens with items impregnated with the scent of other animals, then introduce the sounds of other animals (e.g., socialisation soundtrack), before introducing kittens to the sight of other animals from a distance.
- Supervise kittens during interactions with friendly, healthy, vaccinated animals in the same household.

### 3.2 Socialisation programme

Table 2 provides detailed guidance on the type and timetabling of different experiences that kittens should have during their development.

- Kittens must be monitored throughout the socialisation programme to ensure they are comfortable with the interactions.
- Keep track of each kitten's progress to ensure they are making adequate progress; they are confident around people in a home environment.

### 3.3 Transitioning kittens into new homes

Kittens should be prepared for separation from the mother and littermates the week before they are homed to their new owner.

- Brief, daily periods of separation should be paired with feeding and play so that kittens find periods of separation rewarding.
- Items that are impregnated with the smell of their mother and littermates should accompany kittens in their new home.

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<sup>10</sup> [Responsible Cat Breeding Guidelines](#) (2020).



New owners should be provided with a copy of the kitten's socialisation plan detailing the types of interactions kittens have experienced during their development, and how the kitten has responded and progressed. New owners should be given guidance on continuing socialisation to reinforce and generalise what the kitten has learnt with the breeder (see Section 5: Sources of information).

Provide new owners with a list of things their new kitten likes (e.g., food and toy preferences) so that new owners know what their kitten will find rewarding.



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**Table 2** Socialisation and early experience from birth to 12 weeks of age (adapted from Cats Protection 2021).

	Kitten development period > Week since birth >	Neonatal		Socialisation					Juvenile				
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
<b>Human interaction</b>	Kittens must receive regular, consistent, and positive handling by people from a young age. Handling should be done in the presence of the mother and the kitten's siblings.	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Early gentle handling & daily weighing	Provided the queen is comfortable, kittens may be weighed daily for the first 2 weeks by the breeder or main caretaker. Combine with gentle handling - briefly, hold & gently stroke the kitten <sup>11</sup>	x	x										
Daily interaction & handling	Handling should be positive, predictable, and consistent. Handling should gradually increase in duration as the kitten develops. Daily handling should last from 40 minutes - 2 hours, depending upon the age & acceptance of the kitten. Handling should be done little and often throughout the day (for example, start with 30-60 seconds per handling session for 3-week-old kittens, gradually increase this duration to >5 minutes per handling session for kittens who are 5 weeks or older). Interaction should include play, routine handling, grooming and examination. Detailed guidance on handling kittens is given in videos produced by icatcare: <b>Handling kitten videos:</b> <a href="https://icatcare.org/advice/handling-kittens/">https://icatcare.org/advice/handling-kittens/</a>			x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	Gently hold in hand, stroke along the head, back and tail, touch paws and legs			x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	Lift up and hold kitten					x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	Turnover and stroke under belly					x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Handling for daily care and examination (include as part of daily interaction)	Groom with a soft brush. Grooming can be paired with a food reward.					x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	Handling for examination - checking eyes, ears, mouth, examine under tail and paws. Make this interaction rewarding by pairing with food treats.					x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	Handling for examination - gently pick up and restrain on a table for examination. Make this interaction rewarding by pairing with food treats.							x	x	x	x	x	x
Recall	Call the kitten by name and reward with a food treat for approach.							x	x	x	x	x	x
Meeting new people	Introduce kittens to at least 5 different people (e.g., men, women, children, and elderly). Start with adults and progress to include the elderly and (supervised) children from week 5. As the kitten ages, introductions can be more frequent and			x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

<sup>11</sup> If the queen is accepting, kittens can be weighed shortly after birth and then daily for the first 2 weeks of life. Weighing can be combined with gentle daily handling. Briefly, hold and gently stroke the kitten. **DURING THIS PERIOD KITTENS SHOULD ONLY BE HANDLED BY THE BREEDER OR MAIN CARETAKER. New people should not be introduced until kittens are older.**





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Surfaces	Introduce kittens to different walking surfaces (e.g., carpet, tiles, shiny surfaces, rough surfaces etc). Surface types should be appropriate for stage of mobility. Encourage use with food treats and play.			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Sounds	Kittens should not be exposed to excessive or continuous noise. Use a suitable soundtrack, to help introduce kittens to everyday sounds in a predictable way. Play the soundtrack daily. Start with a low volume so kittens and queens are not alarmed. Once kittens and queens appear comfortable with the noise level, gradually increase the volume over time (days/weeks). Cats Protection have produced <a href="#">soundtracks</a> to help with kitten socialisation, and give detailed guidance on how to use them.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Scratching posts	Provide kittens different scratching substrates and areas. Kittens can be encouraged to explore using food treats.				X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Different scratching substrates: carpet, rope, wood, cardboard				X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Different orientations: vertical, horizontal				X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Different heights: tall structures with different perch heights/accessible from more than one level.				X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Enrichment	Kittens should be provided with safe places to retreat, at safe accessible heights appropriate for their mobility.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Bedding	Provide different types and textures of bedding.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Toys	Provide different toys to help develop coordinated movements and different play behaviours. Only use toys that are suitable and safe for the kitten based on age or stage of development (see Section 5.4 of breeding guidelines). Use toys made from different textures and rotate them regularly. Remember to include interactive play with people, using only appropriate toys – kittens should not play with people's hands and feet.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Cardboard box				X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Soft, furry toy, suitable for use with kittens/cats				X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Toys with catnip				X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Toys that make sounds (e.g., with bells or made from 'scrunchy' material)				X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Fishing rod toys (kittens must not play with these types of toys unattended)				X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X



## Welfare in Pet Trade

Litter tray & litter	Provide enough litter trays for kittens to use without competition. Keep litter trays clean. Ensure litter trays are shallow for kittens to enter safely, but large enough for them to comfortably turn around. Trays should contain enough litter for kittens to cover their urine and faeces.			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Kittens should be provided with different types of cat litter substrates (e.g., clumping litter, woodchip, sand-type litter).			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Food	Weaning should be gradual and must not start before 3-4 weeks of age. A suitable weaning diet should be provided in separate bowls, where possible, and in different types of receptacles (e.g., plastic, metal).			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Kittens should be offered wet and dry kitten food.				X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Kittens should be offered 3-4 different flavours of food to try.					X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Dry food may be presented as scatter feed to encourage natural feeding patterns.					X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Puzzle feeders may be provided to older kittens that are fully weaned and eating well. Do not use when kittens are very hungry and avoid competition.								X	X	X	X	X
Water presentation	For kitten safety, water should be provided in shallow receptacles, large enough to allow young kittens to drink at the same time.			X	X	X	X						
	Provide water in different locations and in different types of receptacles. For older kittens, water fountains can be introduced if it is safe to do so.							X	X	X	X	X	X



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#### 5. Sources of information

##### Further reading:

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Cattledog publishing: Dr Sophia Yin: The art and science of animal behaviour: <https://drsophiayin.com>

Eurogroup for Animals Cats & Dogs: [Cats & dogs | Eurogroup for Animals](#)

International cat care: [www.icatcare.org](http://www.icatcare.org)



LICG: [www.licg.nl](http://www.licg.nl)

Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals: [www.rspca.org.uk](http://www.rspca.org.uk)