

# Choosing and Training a Kitten To Avoid Behavior Problems

## I. CHOOSING A KITTEN

**Over 75% of dog and cat owners consider their pet to have at least one behavior problem. Common problems include aggressive or destructive behavior and housebreaking problems which often lead to a less than satisfying Human/Animal bond. In millions of cases, the surrender of that pet to be "adopted" by another owner or euthanized is the result.** Effective treatment for behavior problems in dogs and cats is available through professional behavior consultants with training in the fields of animal behavior, zoology, psychology and veterinary medicine. The behavior consultant diagnoses the specific cause of the problem behavior, and works with the owner to implement effective treatment for the problem. *It is always easier to avoid behavior problems than to treat them later !*

**One simple way to avoid many future behavior problems** is to choose an appropriate pet for your needs in the first place. To begin, you must take factors in your lifestyle into account, including how much time you will spend at home with the pet, your level of energy (especially for elderly pet owners), your ability to provide daily grooming for a long-haired breed. You should also know the temperament characteristics of the breed, the kitten's mother and father (we currently think the father's genetic input greatly influences his kittens' genetic temperament), and that individual kitten's behavior. This information is easier to obtain with pure-bred cats but there are many wonderful mixed breed kittens available if you are comfortable knowing a bit less about their future adult behavior (due to the very genetic mixing which produces them). Knowledgeable individuals such as local veterinarians, breeders, or members of a Cat Fancy Associations (many can now be found on internet) can also give you the benefit of their experiences with certain individual breeds and particular blood lines in your local area. After choosing a breed, you may be able to find a reputable breeder using a guide such as the San Diego County Dog and Cat Breeders. If you choose to give a mixed breed kitten a much needed loving home, check out local animal shelters, humane societies and rescue organizations that almost always have cats or kitten that need homes. If possible, visit the site where the kitten is being raised and meet the mother, father, and siblings, if available. The best initial predictors of a kitten's behavior comes from the parents and siblings' behavior (genetic influences). Note how these cats all interact with members of the family (including children), strangers, and other cats or dogs. If possible, be sure the kitten was raised in a loving, secure and non-traumatic environment where the kittens were all gently handled between the age of 2-7 weeks. This greatly improves the chances that your new kitten will enjoy humane contact and handling later in life. **Avoid the overly timid and shy kittens who exhibit little play behavior** since they have a good chance of **never** becoming the friendly, self confident cat you may be seeking. Assure yourself that the mother received proper nutrition during pregnancy and lactation as this also can influence her kittens' temperament.

**Once you decide upon that special kitten**, remember that all kittens are cute and that "cuteness" soon fades and what remains is a cat with normal behaviors for that species and particular breed. Study the litter to find a friendly, balanced kitten which is neither withdrawn from people nor overly aggressive in play with its teeth and claws on people's hands and feet. See that the kitten responds appropriately to gentle restraint by the scruff of the neck by relaxing and becoming passive. In most cases kittens should be adopted around 8-11 weeks of age.

## II. TRAINING YOUR KITTEN

**Once adopted**, you should immediately begin working with your kitten to establish good habits and avoid behavior problems. Many behavior problems in older cats can be prevented by teaching the young kitten some simple things. Here are a few suggestions:

- A. **Play biting and scratching** should be discouraged by using an aversive response such as a water sprayer, can with loose pennies, loud noise-maker such as consumer sound generating devices, or even a hiss and scruff hold such as an adult cat would do to discipline a youngster. In addition, a variety of active play toys (or even another kitten) can be provided at least until it moves out of its play phase (few months of age) to redirect the aggressive play towards these.
- B. **Litter pan** use should be encouraged by leaving the young kitten in a small room with easy access to a easily entered box with daily cleaning of litter. If other types of litter may be used in the future, these should be gradually introduced at this time. Additionally, reward litter pan use with vocal praise and, perhaps, even small food treats immediately after the kitten finishes using the box. Good litter pan hygiene (cleanup) and at least one box per cat is helpful to assure continuous use by the kitten.
- C. **Scratching** of furniture can usually be avoided by early introduction of an appropriate scratching post and also a horizontal cardboard or sisal type scratching board in central areas which can be plainly seen and marked. The kitten should be reinforced for using these appropriate areas. If inappropriate furniture is being scratched, the relevant portions should be temporarily covered with aluminum foil, plastic sheeting, or double stick tape to discourage their use while the kitten learns to regularly use the proper scratching areas.
- D. **Eating a variety of foods** is taught at an early age by exposure to different tastes and protein sources. Try a variety of flavors and textures on the young kitten, but change between them gradually to not produce gastrointestinal upset and note which ones are best tolerated by your cat. This is important should your cat ever need a special medical diet.
- E. **Neutering** the adolescent cat can keep many spraying problems from developing and reduce the tendency to fight, or cause fights with other cats. This can often be done between 5-6 months of age but ask your doctor specifics.
- F. **Preventing neighborhood cats** from invading the resident cat's apparent territory (may extend to edge of cat's vision, not just area the resident roams), especially sexually intact toms, can reduce many territorial related behavior problems such as furniture scratching, urine spraying and marking, redirected aggression, and obsessive/compulsive disorders such as psychogenic alopecia.

**If problems do occur, seek *qualified help*** to quickly to "nip them in the bud"! Although no one can guarantee exactly how a kitten will grow up behaving, using the above suggestions can help you avoid many potential behavior problems which will enhance the relationship you and your pet will share throughout its life.

For *more written information* see the book: **Cat Behavior and Training** compiled by Dr. Lowell Ackerman with chapters on preventing (well care) and help with common behavior problems written by various nationally-recognized veterinarians that work with behavior problems (including Dr. Melese). This book was published by T.F.H. in 1996 and can be easily found online.

***This information is provided to you courtesy of Dr. Patrick Melese DVM, DACVB to assist you in preventing or solving your pet's behavior problem.***

***Please check website below and call (858) 259-6115 to schedule an appointment with the doctor.***