

SOCIALIZING KITTENS

If you're working with a kitten 12 weeks old and under who needs more socialization, you've come to the right place! If your kitty is over 12 weeks old, please see our [Fearful Adult Cat Recommendations](#). Cats over 12 weeks must be handled differently and trying to use the below steps on a cat over 12 weeks old could be detrimental to their socialization and actually cause them to further regress.

WHAT IS THE SOCIALIZATION WINDOW?

The socialization window for kittens is a critical period during their early development when they are most receptive to forming positive associations with humans and their environment. It is essential to engage in active and positive socialization during this critical period. This window typically occurs between 2 to 7 weeks of age, with the most crucial period falling between 3 to 7 weeks. Socialization is crucial for kittens to become well-adjusted, confident, and friendly cats. Kittens that have positive human interactions during their socialization window are more likely to be comfortable around people and have fewer behavioral issues. Providing gentle handling, play, and exposure to various people and environments can make a significant difference in their social development. Kittens that miss out on this socialization window may require more time and effort to become comfortable with humans and their surroundings.

THE AGE STAGES

2 TO 3 WEEKS

During this time, kittens are still heavily reliant on their mother and littermates. While they may be curious about their surroundings, they are not yet fully capable of exploring or engaging with humans. However, it's a good time for gentle and minimal handling to introduce them to human scent and touch.

3 TO 7 WEEKS

This is the primary socialization window. Kittens become more active and start to play, explore, and interact with their environment. They are highly influenced by positive and negative experiences during this period, so it's essential to expose them to a variety of stimuli, including different people, sounds, objects, and gentle handling.

7 TO 12 WEEKS

While the primary socialization window starts to close after 7 weeks, it's not a hard cutoff. Kittens can continue to benefit from socialization during this period. However, the rate at which they become comfortable with new experiences may slow down, and they may become more cautious. **DO NOT** force handling on a kitten older than 12 weeks.

KEY FACTORS TO SOCIALIZING UNDER-SOCIALIZED KITTENS

ISOLATION: Initially, keep the kittens in a quiet, separate space like a bathroom or a spare room. This prevents them from hiding or escaping and allows you to control their environment. This is IMPORTANT! Under socialized kittens will avoid humans and will hide. They can hide in the smallest spaces that you may not think possible, like behind a fridge or oven, behind cabinets if there is a crack of space between them and the wall, etc. If your kitten hides and you cannot find them, it is a dangerous situation because they may not be able to find their way back out or may be too scared to come out and can get very sick very quickly if they do not eat.

STARTING SLOWLY: When you first bring the kitten home, sit quietly in the same room, but do not approach immediately. Let them acclimate to your presence. Read a book or work on a laptop so that they get used to your presence. Give them the day to decompress and begin working with them the following day.

FEEDING: This is the MOST important step. **Never free feed the kitten(s) in your absence. Leaving them any type of food signals to them that they can find food without your help and can cause significant delays in their progress.** Through the socialization process kittens should begin to realize that YOU are the source of their food. Sit with them the entire mealtime every time. This process will likely take weeks, don't stop hand feeding as they begin to improve- keep at it until they are extremely social and choosing to approach you without caution.


HANDLING: Starting on day 2 or 3 of being home, begin short handling sessions and do them at least 3-4 times per day, but more if possible. The more often a kitten is handled, the more quickly they will become socialized.


STEPS TO SOCIALIZATION

KEEP IN MIND >> Working on socializing may take days to weeks depending on a kitten's age. Don't lose hope! The more consistently and often you work on handling sessions and only provide food from your hands, the sooner you will begin to see results.

3-4 HANDLING SESSIONS MINIMUM PER DAY

You may want to wear protective gloves if the kitten(s) are hissing/growling and may try to bite. Use a towel to pick up each kitten. Approach slowly (they will be less likely to react to slow deliberate movements) and wrap and fold the towel securely around the limbs and body so that only the kitten's head is exposed:

 Hold the kitten with their head facing away from you to reduce their stress. Approaching from the back, gently and carefully rub the top of the kitten's head and talk in a low, calm voice. You may try to give an extra special wet food treat like churu on a spoon or small spatula and hand feed if the kitten will accept it- this will build a positive association of yummy food whenever being handled. If you do not have this on hand, still rub the kitten's head and hold them close to you. Hold them for about 30 seconds-1 minute then put them back. The goal is short, frequent handling so that they don't get traumatized with something scary being forced in long increments, which could set their progress back.

 As you complete more and more handling sessions, you can slowly progress to stroking the kitten's entire body during the sessions.

TIP >> If you have multiple kittens and one is significantly worse than the others, separate them from the rest of their siblings into an isolated space by themselves. Ideally, separating out the most feral kitten in the group will increase their dependence on you and will significantly speed up their socialization. They can reunite with their siblings when they are socialized.

FEEDING SESSIONS (HAND FEED EVERY MEAL)

Follow the guidelines below for hand feeding sessions. Encourage new experiences at every meal (a little closer, a little more touching, longer duration), but **DON'T** push a kitten too far beyond their comfort zone to the point of trauma. This will set them back.

FEEDING SESSION 1- STAY AT A DISTANCE

Place the food in front of the kitten(s) and back away. Stand/move as far away as you need to in order for them to be willing to eat in your presence. Remain still during feeding. While they eat, speak in a gentle tone to get them to start being used to your voice.

NEXT SESSION(S)- SLOWLY GETTING CLOSER

Place the food in front of the kitten(s) but be a little closer than last session. This can be a small amount, like a few inches closer than last time. As the kitten eats, talk in a gentle tone. Stay in this step for each feeding session until the kitten will eat directly in front of you.

NEXT SESSION(S)- HAND FEEDING

Sit on the ground and hold the food dish while the kitten eats. You can alternatively try holding the food in your hand, or on a spoon held slightly out in front of you. As the kitten eats, gently speak throughout the meal. Stay in this step until the kitten reliably eats while you hold the food.

NEXT SESSION(S)- TOUCH

As the kitten eats, gently touch the kitten. Start by focusing on the head, cheeks, and base of the tail. Touch gently and use slow, deliberate body movements (quick, sudden movements are scary to them!). Continue this step until you can stroke the entire body of the kitten while they remain eating their meal.

PRO TIPS

ONCE YOU'VE PROGRESSED THIS FAR WITH HANDLING & FEEDING SESSIONS EVERY DAY: Continue these steps until the kitten is choosing to approach you and no longer wary of you touching them or holding them. Do **NOT** let them free to roam from their confined space all at once. If you let the world get too big very quickly, this can stress and overwhelm them and cause them to hide, which can compromise the progress they have made. Introduce them to new areas slowly and gently.

AS THE KITTEN MAKES PROGRESS: It is important to introduce them to other human handlers in addition to yourself. Enough exposure to other handlers will help create socialization to humans versus **JUST** to you.