Developmental Stages Of Kitten Behavior

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Well-socialized cats are more likely to have well-socialized kittens. Kittens “feed” off of their mothers’ calm or fearful attitude toward people. Although feeding time is important, it’s also vital to include petting, talking and playing in order to build good “people-skills” in your kitten.

Kittens are usually weaned at six or seven weeks, but may continue to suckle for comfort as their mother gradually leaves them more and more. Orphaned kittens, or those weaned too soon, are more likely to exhibit inappropriate suckling behaviors later in life. Ideally, kittens should stay with their littermates (or other role-model cats) for at least 12 weeks.

Kittens orphaned or separated from their mother and/or littermates too early often fail to develop appropriate “social skills,” such as learning how to send and receive signals, what an “inhibited bite” means, how far to go in play-wrestling and so forth. Play is important for kittens because it increases their physical coordination, social skills and learning limits. By interacting with their mother and littermates kittens learn “how to be a cat,” as well as explore the ranking process (“who’s in charge”).

Kittens that are handled 15 to 40 minutes a day during the first seven weeks are more likely to develop larger brains. They’re more exploratory, more playful and are better learners. Skills not acquired during the first eight weeks may be lost forever. While these stages are important and fairly consistent, a cat’s mind remains receptive to new experiences and lessons well beyond kitten-hood. Most cats are still kittens, in mind and body, through the first two years.

The following chart provides general guidelines for the stages of development.

0 - 2 weeks = Neonatal

- Learning to orient toward sound.
- Eyes are opening, usually open by two weeks.
- Competition for rank and territory begins. Separation from their mother and littermates at this point can lead to poor learning skills and aggression toward people and other pets, including other cats.

2 - 7 weeks = Socialization

- By the third week smell is well-developed and they can see well enough to find their mother.
- By the fourth week smell is fully mature and hearing is well-developed. They start to interact with their littermates, they can walk fairly well, and they’re teeth are erupting.
- By the fifth week sight is fully mature, they can right themselves, run, place their feet precisely, avoid obstacles, stalk and pounce, and catch “prey” with their eyes.
- Start to groom themselves and others.
- By the sixth and seventh weeks they begin to develop adult sleeping patterns, motor abilities and social interaction.

7- 14 weeks = Most active play period

- Social and object play increases their physical coordination and social skills. Most learning is by observation, preferably from their mother.
- Social play includes belly-ups, hugging, ambushing and licking.
- Object play includes scooping, tossing, pawing, mouthing and holding.
- Social/object play includes tail chasing, pouncing, leaping and dancing.

3 - 6 months = Ranking period

- Most influenced by their “litter” (playmates now include companions of other species).
- Beginning to see and use ranking (dominant and submissive) within the household, including humans.

6 - 18 months = Adolescence

- Heightened exploration of dominance, including challenging humans.
- If not spayed or neutered, beginnings of sexual behavior.