

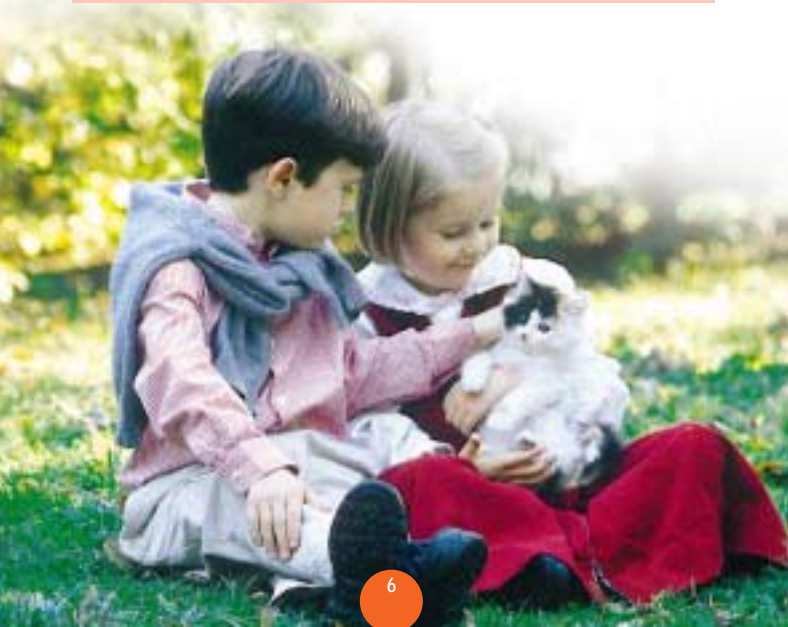


# The Kitten has Arrived!

*You have just adopted a kitten, and are looking forward to many years of companionship. You understand that your new pet is dependent on you for all of its needs and you want to do the best for it. Perhaps you have owned cats before and are already aware of some of the characteristics of this fascinating species or perhaps you are a novice owner and have yet to unravel the mystery of our feline friends.*

*Although dogs and cats are the most common pet species it is important to remember that they are not the same and to resist the temptation to transfer information about pet care between the two species.*

*If your kitten is to grow up to be a happy and contented adult you will not only need to take care of its physical needs, but also give it every opportunity to express its normal behaviour.*



## *Independent but rewarding*

● There are many aspects of feline behaviour which make cats ideally suited to life in the modern world. Their reputation as independent creatures is well deserved and for many owners this characteristic is often very appealing. The cat is happy to cope with periods of separation from its owners and will happily amuse itself when human company is not available. However, it also rises to the challenge of modern pet ownership by responding well to positive interaction with its owners when it is available. The cat offers affection and companionship whilst retaining its right to live its own life and respecting the independence of its master.

## *Maximising the benefits of the cat owner relationship*

● In order to maximise your role as a good owner it is important

to look at life from a feline perspective and appreciate how their different perception of the world around them alters their view of the care that we provide. Their enhanced senses of hearing, smell and touch coupled with their innate desire to hunt makes them a unique species with very specific needs.

## *Socialisation*

● Although cats can learn to appreciate and value human company they do not have a fundamental requirement for it and it is therefore very important that kittens are given adequate and appropriate socialisation with people if they are to become rewarding pets.

● The most important time in a kitten's development for learning to interact in a social context with other cats, people and other domestic species (including the dog) is called the socialisation period and it runs from the second to the seventh week of life.

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For most kittens this period will be spent at the breeder's premises and therefore it is important to select a breeder that pays adequate attention to the socialisation process.

Developmental periods are flexible and it is possible to enhance socialisation once your kitten comes to live with you at two or three months of age, but it has been shown that the response to socialisation is more rapid during the primary socialisation period. Those kittens who have received a good foundation in human interaction at an early age will adapt more quickly to life in a domestic environment and are less likely to develop

behavioural problems, such as fear, anxiety and aggression to people.

- There are a number of factors that are important in teaching kittens that human company is worthwhile and these include the amount of handling that they receive during their socialisation period, the style of that handling and the number of handlers. It has been shown that handling kittens for up to one hour per day, touching them all over, lifting them and gently restraining them, is the best way of preparing them for the sort of contact that owners will want with them as adults. When

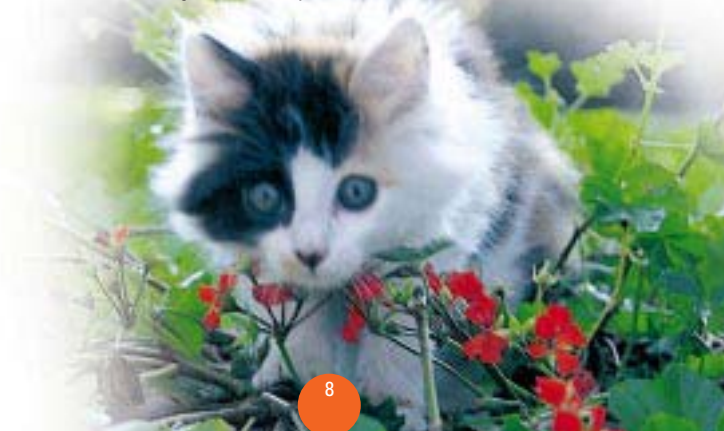
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this handling is carried out by at least four different people kittens will learn to generalise their acceptance of human contact rather than learn to tolerate interaction with a specific individual.

- The social behaviour of your kitten is not only determined by its experience, and the influence of the queen and the tom cat must also be considered. If the queen is a well socialised cat her presence will help to increase the confidence of her kittens and to make them more exploratory in their behaviour. In turn this makes them more likely to seek social contact and to benefit from socialisation. The tom cat also has an influence of the behaviour of his offspring and bold and friendly fathers have been shown to produce kittens that are well adapted for domestic life, both in terms of social interaction and confidence in the face of novelty. It is therefore very important to select your kitten according to the behaviour of its parents, as well as its own behaviour and appearance.

- If you have any concerns about your kitten in terms of socialisation or you have noticed any behavioural problems, such as hiding whenever a stranger appears or showing fear reactions toward you or the environment, do not hesitate to consult your veterinary surgeon. Treatment of these problems will be much more effective if it is started early.

- In order to maximise our relationship with cats we have encouraged the retention of many juvenile behaviours and we encourage our cats to display kittenish responses both in play and in their social interaction. However, excessive displays of suckling and kneading can be indicative of an underlying behavioural disorder and in cases where the kitten sucks on clothing or on human flesh it is important to seek behavioural advice. When this behaviour is combined with displays of fear or aggression you should talk to your veterinary surgeon.





## Training

● The independent nature of the cat leads most people to assume that there is little that they can do to bring their pet's behaviour under their control and you may not even have considered the issue of training. However, cats do need to learn how to behave and common examples of training include teaching kittens to use a litter tray or a cat flap, introducing the cat to travel in a cat basket and training cats to come when they are called.

● In addition to specific training kittens also need to learn how to control their own behaviour and limit potential injury to others.

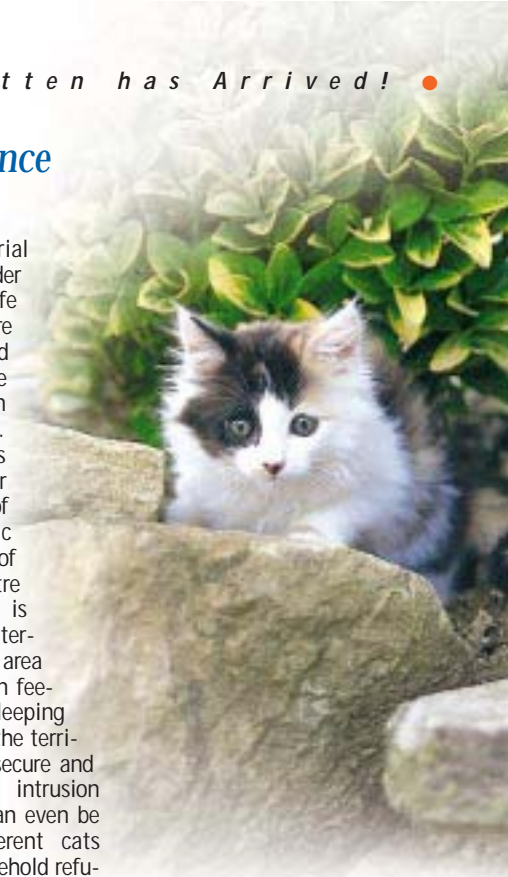
Part of this process involves learning that the use of teeth and claws is not acceptable when interacting with owners and other pets, and it is therefore very important not to encourage their use during play. Games which involve running fingers over the back of the sofa, or teasing the kitten with feet beneath the duvet, should be avoided and play should be directed onto appropriate toys instead.

● Teaching appropriate behaviours from an early age is always preferable to punishing unsuitable behaviour and in the case of the cat this is particularly true.

For a creature which has no innate need for social contact punishment is entirely inappropriate and runs the risk of seriously damaging the pet – owner relationship.

## The importance of territory

● Cats are territorial creatures and in order to be content in life they need to be secure within their home and to feel comfortable and at ease within their wider territory. The feline territory is divided into a number of areas and each of these has a specific function in terms of behaviour. The centre of the cat's territory is often termed its core territory and within this area the cat will engage in feeding, playing and sleeping activity. This part of the territory should be very secure and free from unwanted intrusion from other cats. It can even be the case that different cats within the same household refuse to share their core territory and it is important to consider providing distinct areas where each individual can feel safe and secure.



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● Cats live in a three dimensional world and one very useful way of increasing the space that is available is to offer high up resting places in the form of radiator cradles, shelves and tops of wardrobes. Being high up helps to resolve stress for cats and it is often the case that cats in multi-cat homes will select to rest at different levels, as well as in different areas, of the home. However, it is not only multi-cat households that need secure feline resting places and all cats need to be provided with a safe bolt hole which they can retreat to for a bit of peace and quiet. Right from the very first day, you should give your kitten a secure core territory and allow it time to rest totally undisturbed by the children, the dog or any other members of the new household.

● Beyond the core territory the cat will define a home range and a hunting range and for most domestic pets these will include the garden and surrounding areas. In order to avoid unnecessary interaction with other

cats in the neighbourhood, and to reassure the individual of its right to occupy the area, cats will use scent markers to define specific passage tracks through the territory. These marks may take the form of facial secretions, which are deposited during facial rubbing, or urine or faeces, which are deposited as a form of communication rather than an act of toileting. Facial marks will also be used within the home environment and the sight of a cat rubbing up against a piece of furniture or a doorway within the home tells you that he is depositing scent signals which will reassure him and familiarise him with the indoor territory. Deposition of urine or faeces as markers within the home is not to be expected and when it does occur it is important to assess why the individual cat feels the need to use such deliberate markers within what should be seen as a secure environment.

● If problems of marking do occur within your home or your cat is showing signs of anxiety

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it is important to consider the potential reasons for a lack of confidence in the environment and to ensure that you are not inadvertently removing your cat's security signposts by excessively cleaning the marks that it has rubbed against strategic walkways and furniture within the house.

### *Cleanliness is next to Godliness*

● Cats are generally regarded as being clean creatures and their fastidious nature endears them to many people. Indeed the lack of house training demands from kittens gives them a considerable advantage over the puppy in the eyes of many owners and is a significant factor in their increasing popularity.

● This reputation is a well founded one, and so it is all the more disappointing for a cat-owner to find that their cat is not clean. Avoiding problems related to house training relies on providing your cat with access to suitable latrine facilities and the

indoor cat will need to be given a litter tray for this purpose. Outdoor cats may also need a litter tray from time to time and most kittens will need one in the early weeks of life when access to outdoors needs to be restricted. They may also need to use one at other times throughout their lives either through illness or circumstances.



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● Whatever the reason for providing a litter tray it is important for it to be constantly accessible both during the day and at night, since cats are naturally nocturnal creatures and are likely to want to use the facilities while the rest of the household is sleeping.



The location of the tray must be acceptable to the cat, as must the type of litter that is used, and it is important to consider these factors from a feline and not a human perspective.

● Very simple alterations in the litter facilities can often lead to problems of house soiling and the first thing to consider if urine or faeces are being deposited in the home is why are the litter tray facilities not acceptable. There are a variety of trays available on the market and it is important to get one that your individual cat accepts. The basic variations between the trays relate to the depth of the pan and to the presence or absence of a hood and the choice is very much dependant on personal preference. The type of litter material which is used in the tray can also have very dramatic effects on your cat's behaviour and in general

the finer litters are better tolerated than the pelleted versions. However, many owners use pellets without any problems and there can be no hard and fast rules.

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● It is important for litter facilities to be maintained in an hygienic manner and the litter should be cleaned regularly, but it is also important for your cat to build up an association with the tray and excessive cleaning, especially in the early days, can lead to some disruption and confusion.

If children are playing in the same room as the tray or the family dog is liable to come over and sniff the cat on its litter, then the location of the tray should be considered. This is not only important on health grounds but also because a cat needs to feel safe and secure in its latrine and any threats to that security could lead to breakdowns in house training.

● If your cat does begin to deposit urine or faeces in unacceptable locations it is very important to differentiate between problems of elimination and marking and there are a few indicators which should help you to do that.

● The posture of the cat will hold some clues as to the motivation for the behaviour, with toileting cats adopting a squatting position and marking cats adopting a very characteristic spraying posture.

The cats reaction to the litter facilities may also be relevant, with marking cats continuing to use the tray without any problems and toileting cats showing a very noticeable alteration in their reaction toward the facilities.

● If you do have problems relating to cleanliness with your cat it is important for you to seek advice from your veterinary surgeon at the earliest opportunity since the earlier these problems are diagnosed the easier they are to treat.



## Hunting for fun?

● One very common misconception amongst cat owners is that feeding their cat more will protect the birds and wildlife. In fact the motivation to hunt has absolutely nothing to do with hunger and this makes very good sense in terms of the cat's need to survive. Cats are solitary hunters and if they wait until they are hungry before they try to detect and dispatch prey they run a very high risk of dying from starvation. After all prey may simply be unavailable when hunger strikes. Instead the cat is tuned for the kill at all times and when movement and sound combine to trigger the natural instinct even the best fed and pampered pet will not be able to resist the desire to pounce.

## The importance of play

● Play is a vital outlet for feline hunting behaviour and cats need to be offered small rapidly moving targets on which to practice their eyeing, stalking

and pouncing skills. They should also be given the chance to catch and dispatch some of these prey items and toys must be suitable for this purpose. They must not run any risk of fragmenting or breaking when the cat attempts to kill them and they should combine sound and movement in order to trigger the hunting instinct. Balls of tin-foil which catch the light and make a rustling sound as they roll are ideal toys for the inquisitive cat and suspended toys which move erratically are also highly rewarding.

● In the wild cats will spend up to 6 hours a day hunting and play for indoor cats must reflect this enormous proportion of the



cat's daily time budget. If you make the decision to keep your cat indoors you will need to be prepared to invest some considerable time in this activity.

● A lack of opportunity to hunt imaginary prey can result in cats showing predatory behaviour toward any available moving objects in their environment,

and owner's hands, feet and ankles are common targets. If you encounter this problem it is important to reassess your home through feline eyes and ensure that you are providing the right sort of stimulation for your cat. If the problems still continue do not hesitate to discuss them with your veterinary surgeon.

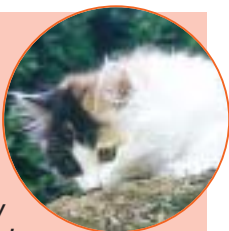
## Scratching for pleasure

● As a member of the cat family, your kitten needs to scratch as a way of staking out its territory, and shedding loose claws. Providing a "scratching post" at an early age will help to divert this activity away from expensive furniture.

● Territory marking also occurs when your kitten rubs itself up against you, it is marking you by means of its facial glands, with the calm familiarity of its own pheromones. Do not interfere.



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*Cats are fascinating animals and despite living in close proximity with man they retain much of the natural behaviour of their wild ancestors. Living with a happy and contented cat is a great source of pleasure and taking the time to provide our cats with the environmental stimulation that they require is rewarded by the opportunity to watch this incredible creature at close quarters. The rewards of cat ownership are numerous and you will have hours of fun watching your kitten at play. The bond that forms between you will be a source of peace and amusement and research shows that owning a cat can also be good for your health. However, problems can arise and if your cat begins to exhibit any behaviour which causes you concern you should not hesitate to contact your veterinary surgeon to discuss it.*

Sarah Heath  
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