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Full paper:

As we advance in animal welfare, we continue seeking more ways to save animals AND more ways to improve the lives of the animals we save. To that end, kitten development and socialization have been gaining more interest and attention in recent years.

The degree to which kittens may be successfully socialized depends on many variables, including genetics, interactions with humans and other animals, and the age at which those interactions occur.

Nature and nurture both play important roles in the kitten's personality. Some traits are affected genetically, while others may be influenced – positively or negatively – through interactions with humans and other animals.

The age of the kittens, likewise, will play an important role in how well, how completely and how quickly they socialize.

The age period of two weeks to two months, aptly termed the “socialization period,” is a crucial time for kitten socialization. This is not to say that kittens older than two months cannot become more social; in fact, there are many cases of older kittens and even some adult cats becoming more tame (or social) with time and managed expectations. However, the older the kittens are, the less likely it is that they will socialize as quickly or completely as those who are still in the “socialization period.”

All kittens should be provided with a safe and nurturing environment, and those coming to us with no previous human interactions may require some additional considerations.

First, be sure to address the safety of the caregiver. Unsocialized or semi-socialized kittens may react out of fear rather than aggression. Even so, claws and teeth are sharp, so proper care should be taken to minimize the chances of accidental injury. Use gloves or towels during initial interactions and until each kitten's behavior can be better anticipated. Some organizations have a policy that only staff and volunteers who have had training on safety and socializing techniques interact with these kittens.

Patience, slow movements and soft voices are a must for human-kitten interactions. This will help scared, shy or semi-feral kittens relax and begin trusting humans.

Each kitten is different and will progress at different rates; however, most kittens within the two weeks to two months age range transform within a few days to a few weeks.

Two of the most successful strategies to socializing kittens include:

- 1) Providing several shorter, positive interactions during the day rather than one or two longer ones
- 2) Being the source of all things good while present

Visit and interact with the kittens frequently. Also, whenever possible, leave tension and frustrations at the door before coming into the room with the kittens. Caregivers need to be



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calm and relaxed, and tensions can work against positive interactions. By initially limiting interactions to short amounts of time, both the caregiver and the kittens can avoid becoming frustrated or stressed which could lead to a stall in progress.

The second strategy incorporates food, toys, and other items or actions that the kittens recognize as good. Be the source of all things good. When you are present, the kittens get extra tasty food. When you are present (and the kittens have become comfortable enough to play), they get time with a favorite toy. Give the kittens reasons to associate humans with good and provide rewards for positive behaviors and interactions.

First arrival and quiet time:

Upon first arrival, and assuming no life-threatening injury/illness, kittens should be provided with a safe, quiet place and be left undisturbed for an hour or two. Be sure the basics of food, water and litter are provided, and then give them quiet time. Providing a hiding place is also recommended, and it can be as simple as a cardboard box within the larger cage or holding area. If kittens will be housed in a small room, it is advisable to also have them in a cage – initially – within the room. This prevents accidental escape when the caregiver enters the room.

A kitty-cam, if available, is useful for monitoring kittens remotely while not disturbing them. It may also provide you with insights to their behavior with each other, which kittens seem most confident, dominant or least scared.

It is also helpful at first to limit the number of people who interact with the kittens. Two or three caregivers in a shelter environment can usually cover all the care shifts. Hold off on extra interactions from additional staff and volunteers until the kittens have adjusted well to a couple people. Are there certain staff members who enjoy socializing kittens? Try, whenever possible, to have those people be the primary care givers.

Housing, cage or small room:

Cage: Pay attention to bar spacing so tiny kittens can't slip out or become dangerously caught up while trying to get through. Whenever possible, house kittens in cages that are higher off the floor - at least waist height or place the cage upon a table. Being higher up allows the kittens to better view their surroundings; this seems to help them be more relaxed. Further, a chair in front of the cage allows the caregiver to comfortably sit and visit with the kittens at the same level while also making access to the cage easier.

In addition to ensuring that the bar spacing on a cage is safe, be careful about the height of perches or shelves within the cage. Be sure water and food bowls are easily accessible without being a risk for falling or tipping. Try using a low-sided litter box to start. This may be a little messier than a high-sided one; however, kittens are less likely to stay in the litter box as a hiding spot if it has lower sides and also if a better hiding box is provided. As with all felines, place the litter box and the food/water as far apart from each other as possible.



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Room: Housing the kittens in a small room without too many hiding places is a popular option especially for foster homes. A bathroom is often ideal. There are few places to hide, and the places that the kittens can hide behind, i.e. the toilet, are usually still reachable by the caregiver. Furthermore, bathrooms tend to be tiled and easier to clean than carpeted areas. Avoid larger spaces like living rooms or bedrooms as they have many places where kittens can hide and not be accessible, i.e. under a couch or bed. Also take into consideration how easy the space will be to clean and what items might have to be removed – for the safety of the kittens or for the safety of the items themselves!

If housing kittens in a bathroom, be sure the toilet lid is down and ALL knick-knacks, towels, shower curtains, rugs and other items are removed. This includes the roll of toilet paper which can be quickly shredded into confetti by curious kittens. Also, be sure that any cabinet doors are secured or all the items inside are removed including cleaning supplies, toxins or other dangerous items.

Feeding and Rewards:

Highly desired food, - and later, favorite toys – should be available to the kittens only when the caregiver is present. The kittens must absolutely be provided with the appropriate amount of food during the day, but it can be provided while the caregivers are present – thereby being the source of something good. It must be noted that especially in the first few hours and perhaps days, some kittens may be very reluctant to eat while a human is present. If caregivers can move to a far side of the room and remain still, kittens may come out to eat, but some may not. In such cases, kittens must be provided with adequate food even without the caregiver being present. If you decide to leave food in the cage, consider leaving only kibble and provide the wet food only as a treat when a human is present. Be positive, however, that kittens are eating. If they are not eating the kibble, and still won't eat in the presence of a human, wet food must also be provided to ensure they are eating enough. Again, kitty cams may help staff monitor if all kittens in the litter are eating, which kitten is first to leave the hiding space, etc.

When working with kittens during socialization times, use tasty wet food, treats and even human baby food (plain turkey or chicken puree – with no garlic or onions) as rewards for positive behavior: for coming out of their hiding box, for taking a step or two toward the front of the cage, for allowing the caregiver to place his/her hand by the front of the cage – and then incrementally closer to the kittens over the next few days, etc. A note of caution: NEVER initially put canned food, baby food, etc. on your finger to offer to the kittens. ALWAYS use a small spoon, tongue depressor or other delivery utensil as an extension of your hand. When some kittens realize how good the food tastes, they go instantly from a lick to a full-mouth chew and, although they don't mean to bite the caregiver, that is the unfortunate result in some cases. Be sure staff and volunteers are well aware of any bite/quarantine/reporting protocols. With caution and proper handling techniques they will hopefully never need to use them!

Interactions:

Visual:

Avoid staring directly at the kitten – sideways or unnoticed glances are less threatening to the kitten.



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Avoid wearing lanyards or long chains with large items attached that may seem threatening if they are swinging, for example when leaning forward or over toward the cage or kittens. If they must be worn, place them to the back or tuck them into a shirt pocket to prevent excess motion.

Slightly dimmed lighting is preferable to very bright, and there should be times when the lights are (almost) completely off as well in order to provide “night time.” The light from emergency exit signs, and/or a small night light is fine.

As the kittens become more comfortable in the presence of humans, remove the hiding space for portions of time during the day, allowing them access for decreasing amounts of time. If you see that they are willingly spending some time in the hiding spot and some outside the hiding spot, it may not be necessary to remove the hiding area. Even social kittens can benefit from a box to occasionally spend some quiet time in.

Transitioning from a box with solid walls to one which is more translucent is also a way to allow the kittens a hiding space while still also allowing some visual connection to their surroundings. It works both ways and allows the caregivers to see in as well!

Sounds:

Use a low, soft voice when speaking to the kittens. Similarly, if a radio is playing, be sure the volume is low and the content is soothing.

Be sure that cage and room doors are not clanging loudly when being opened or closed. Likewise, any food preparation, rattling of bowls, etc. should be minimized especially in the beginning. As kittens become more accustomed to their surroundings, however, stimuli can and should be increased as part of the socializing process and getting them used to new things.

Touching and handling:

Do not attempt to handle the kittens for the first day, but visit them, speak softly to them and move slowly. You might want to provide them with some treats that you can put through the cage bars.

Use a glove until you know the kittens' temperament better. You can spray a calming feline pheromone on the glove and even on the kittens' bedding before placing them in their cage or housing area. Allow the pheromone spray to dry at least 15 minutes prior to introducing the kittens in order to allow the alcohol carrier to dissipate.

Touching initially with a toothbrush or small cat comb is safer for you and less threatening to the kitten. Provide, slow petting and scratching – not fast or rough. Start on the sides and gradually increase the area to include the chest, neck, chin and face as well as the rump. Avoid touching the underside initially, but as the kitten becomes more adjusted and approaches adoption, include the belly a little bit, too.

Some advocate wrapping the kitten in a towel and holding on your lap. While some kittens do respond to this, for others it increases stress, clawing and biting and the risk of kittens escaping.

Instead, with a gloved hand, reach into the kitten's cage – approaching from the side if at all possible to be less threatening. Gently stroke the kitten's side. Do this several times a day. When you are confident that the kitten does not want to bite, you may use thinner gloves. After



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a day or two, place your hand under the kitten to lift him/her. Pick the kitten up in the cage and put him/her back down within just a few seconds. Give a reward treat. Lift again for a few seconds longer, put down, reward. Lift, move forward toward the front of the cage, then back again, put down, reward. Once the kitten becomes accustomed to such handling, you can move on to lifting, moving out of cage and lowering onto your lap. Be sitting right in front of cage so distance is minimized. Remain cautious of the kitten wanting to jump away.

Find the kitten's "sweet spot". Petting by ears, chin, bridge of nose, shoulders, rump? Using a toothbrush first is often a less-threatening way to explore where that sweet spot may be. Then, later, you can stroke or gently scratch this area with your hand to make quicker progress.

Play:

Don't be discouraged if kittens do not play in front of you initially. Once they become more accustomed to your presence, they will relax and start displaying more behaviors typical of social kittens. A string toy or wand toy is often helpful for drawing kittens out of their shells. Never leave kittens alone with any string toy as they can accidentally ingest the string or become tangled. Test out other toys to determine which ones the kittens like best. Provide those toys only when in the presence of the caregiver – being the source of all things good.

Increasing Space and Stimuli:

As kittens progress in becoming more social and are willing to come toward you for food or affection, allow them more space. Transfer them to a larger, condo-type cage or a small, secure room. If they must remain in a caged space, shelves, perches and hammocks are great ways to increase space available within a cage and to provide kittens with additional places for sleeping and playing.

Gradually increase the amount of time being held and even the positions for holding the kittens. For example, practice handling and positioning like they would be for veterinary visits and blood draws. Scruffing is no longer a recommended method of restraint, and fear-free, minimal restraint practices should be used. Practice positioning kittens for nail trims and get them used to having their claws cut. Start with just a few claws and always reward positive behaviors.

Signs that you are making progress and kittens are adjusting:

-Body posture. Kittens begin tucking their paws under rather than keeping on all fours and a front paw ready to strike. They begin laying stretched out on their sides – even in the presence of a human.

-Behaviors. Lack of hissing, striking, biting. Purring or meowing. Sleeping, eating and playing in your presence. Willingness to interact with human in play. Willingness to approach caregiver – either in the room or, if in a cage, to come to the front of the cage.

Once kittens have become comfortable with a couple caregivers, introduce them to new people. A cadre of volunteers specially trained for interacting with semi-social kittens is a great way to increase kittens' exposure. It is important that kittens be introduced to a variety of people, ages, races, genders, etc. Similarly, kittens should be introduced to new sights and sounds. Cell phones can be used to pull up a wide range of sounds from vacuum cleaners, to garbage trucks, to barking dogs, doorbells, etc. Having a TV or radio in the room will help introduce to



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new voices and sights. Be sure kittens also have quiet time without stimuli and darkened or very dimmed lights at night.

Differing rates of transformation within a litter:

Sometimes unsocialized kittens will rely on their siblings and, even after time, will still avoid the social interaction of a human. In these cases, separating out the less social kitten may be tough love so he/she can no longer hide behind its sibling.

If kittens are separated, keep them at least in sight of each other to minimize stress. Often, when the less-social kitten sees that its siblings are not afraid of the humans, and that it is possible to interact with humans without harm, the single/separated kitten comes around more quickly. Time with siblings could even be reward for positive behavior.

Most kittens less than 8 weeks of age will socialize within 2-3 weeks. Those 8-12 weeks old may take a week or two longer. Every cat and kitten is different, so the amount of time it takes to socialize will depend on each individual and how much interaction and time they each have every day with humans.

It should be noted that not every kitten will become socialized, and it is important to have a positive outcome plan for those who may not socialize. A safe outdoor environment with shelter and a consistent caregiver for food is an option. A program termed "Spirit Cats" may also be an option for adoptions into homes. These are cats that may do better indoors, but that may not be seen frequently by the people living there. See additional information in "References".

Keep in mind that many, but not all, kittens can be socialized to enjoy human interactions and life in a home. It is a very rewarding process for caregivers who have time and patience to watch a frightened kitten, whose future may have been grim, transform into an affectionate kitten ready for adoption into a loving home.

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