



BETTERTOGETHER  
ANIMAL ALLIANCE

# SOCIALIZING KITTENS OVER 8 WEEKS OLD



Socializing older kittens is a rewarding but challenging task. Socialization is the process of preparing a pet to enjoy interactions and be comfortable with people, places, activities, and other animals. Positively exposing a pet to as many different things as possible when they are young (ideally during the “socialization period,” which is between 3 and 7 weeks of age for kittens) means they will be less fearful, and puts them on the path to become social, happy, well-adjusted adults.

The most powerful method for socializing kittens after the “socialization period” that have had no previous experience with humans (or worse, negative experience!) is called desensitization and counterconditioning. These are classical conditioning techniques designed to reduce an animal’s fear associated with something, by exposing them to it gradually and by consistently pairing it with something they find enjoyable.

## **Kitten Socialization in 7 Steps**

Depending on the kitten’s age and previous experience with humans, you may be able to skip some of these steps. The important thing to remember is to let each kitten guide your progression by watching for signs of fear, anxiety, and stress (including hissing/growling, wide

eyes/dilated pupils, withdrawal/ hiding, lack of play/exploratory behavior, tense posture, and flattened ears), and by never pushing them past their threshold.

- Set the scene. Prepare an environment for the kittens that is large enough for both you and the kittens to occupy, but small and decluttered enough that you will not lose them under beds, etc. It is ideal for this environment to be out of high traffic areas, but not completely isolated from all household activities. An extra-large dog crate in a quiet corner of a main room is usually perfect. A small bathroom can be a good choice as well. Make sure the space has all the items a kitten will need: a litter box, food and water dishes, a hiding box, toys, a scratching surface, and lots of comfy surfaces for resting.
- Monitor. For the first day or two, sit calmly when you provide their food. Feel free to talk quietly to them, encouraging them to come forward. Watch to make sure that they are eating well, using the litter box, and will eat in front of you.
- Desensitization and counterconditioning to your presence.
  - Sit in the cage or just outside the door. Place a bowl of food right in front of the kittens. Sit without moving and without making eye contact. Allow at least 20 minutes. If they do not eat in front of you (or if they finish eating but there is food left in the dish) remove the food and try again later. Always leave water with them, but never food unless you are in their presence.
  - Once they will reliably eat in your presence, start putting the food bowl a few inches closer to you on your next visit. Offer the food a few inches closer each time, so long as the kittens would eat the food without much hesitation at the last distance.
  - Eventually, they should be comfortable eating from the bowl while your hand is touching it. During this process, keep movement to a minimum and ensure any necessary movement is as slow as possible. It is important that you not attempt to touch them during this phase. Finally, remember to take any uneaten food with you each time you leave.
- Desensitization and counterconditioning to contact.
  - Next time you visit, instead of offering the bowl, smear wet food on your finger and offer this to the kittens. Keep your arm extended and still. Be patient, this will be a big step for the kittens. You may want to try offering something extra tasty to motivate them like baby food. Do not force your finger into the kitten's face – offer it as close to them as they are comfortable and allow them to approach you.
  - At this point you can also try offering the bowl of food on your lap. Use the tasty food on your finger to lure them to the bowl. If some are braver than others, you may need to lure them into a carrier to work with the shyer ones.
  - Once a kitten is comfortable at this stage, it is time to initiate active contact. Attempt this at the beginning of a session when the kittens are still motivated by hunger. While they are eating off your finger or from a bowl, gently touch them around the head and shoulder area. Depending on the comfort level of the kitten, you may decide to touch them with a back scratcher or wand toy before using your hands. Ensure you start touching after they start eating and stop touching before they stop eating.

- Finally, you can extend the petting after the cats have finished eating. Offer your hand to kittens at other times during your visits. If they choose to rub against it, engage in petting – but do not force it upon them.
- Desensitization and counterconditioning to being picked up.
  - On your next visits, extend your petting from the head and shoulders to under the belly. While they are engrossed in eating, begin gently nudging them from side to side.
  - At this point, begin bringing two bowls on your visits. When they are eating, gently lift/scoot them the short distance from one dish to the other. Be sure to make the motion smooth and swift.
  - The next step will be your first attempt to pick them up. Once they are engrossed in eating from the dish in your hand, put your other hand under their chest (loosely) and lift both the kitten and the food dish a short distance off the ground. If the kitten continues eating, repeat a few times. Increase the distance off the ground each day. Eventually bring them to the warmth of your chest.
  - Eventually try picking them up without food. After a good long session where the kitten(s) are very full and getting sleepy, try gentle petting and work up to holding and petting without the incentive of food being present. If this works, you should be able to try it at other times between meals.
- Generalizing their skills.
  - At this point they are ready to be moved out of the bathroom or dog crate and into a larger environment, without fear of losing them. The room should have hiding opportunities (such as cardboard boxes), but nothing so big/deep that would make working with the kittens difficult. Continue to work on their new skills but expect there to be some regression. Be patient and consistent – they will rebound.
  - Once their skills have rebounded, begin introducing them to new people and normal (but potentially scary) stimuli, like televisions. Ensure all introductions are accompanied with food.
- Placement.
  - Kittens are now ready for adoption! Make sure the families adopting them understand that these kittens have only recently been socialized, and that their transition into a home environment may take longer than another kitten. Finding an understanding home and managing expectations will increase the likelihood of a successful placement.
  - Provide the new owners with a copy of this plan so they can thoroughly understand their experiences, and to arm them with the skills to continue the socialization process in their new environment.
  - If you are unable to find a home for the kittens on your own, feel free to contact BTAA for assistance.

## Tips

1. This guide recommends that you spent at least 20 minutes per day with the kittens, but many sources recommend sessions be much longer (up to 2 hours).
2. Kittens up to 8 weeks old are easiest to socialize and should progress through this program rather quickly – steps 2-6 should each take only a few days. Kittens will progress at different rates. Be patient and stick with the program.
3. For kittens and cats over 8 weeks old, the same steps are applicable, but the process will take much longer, and your probability of success is likely to be reduced. For cats between 12 weeks and 6 months, each step may take 3 weeks. Socializing cats over 6 months is generally not advisable. However, if you choose to attempt this program with cats of this age, each step may take months.
4. It is important never to push a kitten to progress through the steps too quickly. As a rule, if a kitten is comfortable enough to eat, they have not been pushed past their threshold.
5. If a kitten is pushed past their threshold, try to lure them back with food and end the interaction on a positive note. It might be necessary to take a step back on your next visit.
6. Once a step has been mastered, only offer regular food as a reward for that step. Save the favorite treat for working on new skills.
7. Many kittens are too frightened by their first few exposures to play with a human, but many socializers can find play to be the best way to experience breakthroughs, so it is worth trying. Just make sure you start with a toy that is non-threatening and keeps distance between you and them.

870 Kootenai Cutoff Rd.

Ponderay, ID 83852

208-265-7297

