



Island Cat Resources And Adoption

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Kitten Socializing Lessons Learned

by
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1. **Once you take responsibility for the kitten, be willing to put them in a cage or large carrier and avoid the temptation to really begin handling them for the first 8-12 hours or so**, depending upon how stressed and frightened they appear. Have their socializing cage/carrier set up BEFORE you attempt to transfer the cat/kitten into it, i.e., food, water, litter pan, towels & blankets, etc. If you are using a cage, also place a towel or sheet to cover at least three sides and the top of the cage so the animal doesn't feel so exposed and vulnerable. **Let the kitten have time to “chill” and acclimate before you dive into any hard-core socializing.**

2. **Establish a socializing area in a quiet, calm part of the house.** It's a nice idea to have a radio tuned to a soft classical or jazz station so the cat can get more used to hearing the sound of a human voice even when you're not there. Invest in a night light.

3. **Have plenty of tasty wet food and/or baby food on hand to use as kitty “bribe” material during your socializing time.** The goal is to try to force the kitten/cat to associate treats and pleasurable things (whatever suits their fancy) with you and the time you spend together. I made sure I gave every kitten approximately a tablespoon or so every time I entered the room to work with them...and sometimes in between as I was just passing through depending upon their interest level in what I was doing. I tried to stress quality over quantity in the treat department. As the kittens begin to drop their guard and become the slightest bit excited about the prospect of receiving a treat, I got better results in the long run leaving them wanting more, so to speak.

4. **Prepare the tasty treat right in front of the kitten's cage to get interest.** Make sure they watch you place the food inside the cage. At first, you might have just enough time to drop it in and pull your hand out before the kitten lunges and spits. It may be a while before the kitten will even eat in front of you or until you re-latch the cage. Don't give up. Try your best to keep your hand attached to the dish/bowl as long as possible each time you provide a treat, eventually building up to the point where you can hold onto it the entire time the kitten is eating.

5. **Be prepared to get hissed at, spit on, lunged at, and growled at for a while.** Every kitten is different. The really scared and ornery little battle machines will throw their bodies at you and even try to bite. This behavior *could* go on for a couple of weeks. As dumb as it sounds, I made the most

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progress by being persistent and not letting them see my fear by pulling away, for example. I avoided making direct eye contact with the kittens at this stage but kept at it in terms of slowly sticking my hand in to touch or stroke them along the back from the back of their heads toward the rear. For a while, depending upon the kitten's potential to draw blood or desire to kill me, I wore a thick glove and let the kitten smack away and even nip my hand – the goal was to show them I wasn't going to back down or retreat. The majority of the kittens I worked with eventually got tired of beating on me every time I opened their cages.

If a kitten is obviously in a rough state and too aggressive to even consider touching with your hand at first – gloved or not – use something like a back scratcher or fly swatter to gauge how the kitten reacts to touch. Be mindful of the kitten's body language and voice. This will tell you how and at what pace to proceed.

Being able to touch, handle and pick up the kitten CALMLY and CONFIDENTLY is critical. Even reaching in to change food bowl, water, and litter revolves around the progress you make here. You have to be confident, calm and persistent when you make the move to scruff a kitten. Before you do scruff him/her, **know what you are going to do next**, i.e., put the kitten in a carrier or on your lap. A scared, untame kitten is not going to take well to being carried around like a clutch purse while you fumble around deciding what to do.

In your overall tone and body language, let the kitten sense that you aren't scared to handle it. Even a 8-12 oz. kitten can be quite intimidating when it's tense, excited, and frantically thrashing in your hands. Learn how to scruff the wild ones and transition them slowly to your lap and into a towel for some relaxed stroking and talk. Repeat this routine over and over until the kitten feels at ease in your lap being touched. Use the towel to protect yourself and to provide a convenient hiding shroud for the kitten when it becomes scared or gives you the signal that it's had enough for the time being (the same calming effect a towel has when thrown over a trap).

6. Every hour counts when you're trying to "turn" a scared, untamed kitten. It sounds overly dramatic, but letting more than 10-12 hours go by without even some handling can make the difference for some kittens between getting a home and having to be re-released to their colony. Having them fed and safely tucked away in a cage does not equal socializing. **THEY NEED TO HUMAN CONTACT TO MAKE THIS HAPPEN.** Obviously, most of us cannot spend every waking moment handling the kittens, but when you are home – persistence, frequency, and patience are key. **Be prepared to spend AT LEAST 30 quality minutes of actual handling twice a day with each kitten if you expect to make any significant progress before it's too late.** The more time you spend with them, the faster and better results you will get.

7. The more people you can get the kitten accustomed to the better. Having more than one person handle and work with the kitten helps them avoid the pitfall of only bonding or relating to one person and one person only. If you do entrust the socializing of your kitten to someone else for part of the day, make absolutely sure it's someone you trust to be calm, gentle, methodical, and most of all, cat savvy.

8. If you have someone helping you socialize a kitten, **keep a log of the kitten's progress.** I found this helpful in letting me know when a particular kitten might be having a rough day or a remarkably good day with the other socializer. From there I could determine whether to push the kitten a bit or to back off. Even if you are doing the socializing yourself, this is a good idea to help you gauge the kitten's personality over time, likes/dislikes, quirks, how it relates to people, other cats/kittens, etc. This information can be helpful when filling out the kitty bio and in jogging your memory down the road come adoption time.

7. **Be prepared for unexplained setbacks and plateaus.** Kittens have some good and not-so-good days, just like people. Keep on handling, but back off for a little while if necessary if the kitten appears stressed all of a sudden.

8. **Be equally prepared for sudden breakthroughs.** The kitten who one hour ago tried to take your head off is now purring and "talking" to you from the cage as you walk through the room...asking for attention. Go with it and press on.

9. In addition to actual handling, I spent **a lot** of time just passing by the kittens in their cages, making sure to talk to them and get them used to hearing their names. I would stop at each cage to gauge reactions/moods. I also wanted them to get used to humans walking around them and going about the daily routines of life that don't involve handling. I talked to the kittens all the time. I also spent a good deal of time doing things outside the cage to attract their attention. I took my cue from those kittens who seemed interested and ready to engage with toys, etc.

10. **Especially for the more fearful hard cases, start those kittens off in cages up off the ground.** These kittens are frightened enough without their only impression of you being that of a giant towering over their cage. They need to see your face and hands, not just your feet and legs. As they settle down and progress through socialization, then you can think about placing their cage at ground level. If they flinch or huddle in the corner as you pass, move them back up to a higher cage until they're ready. **In addition to helping the kittens adjust to you, having the cage/carrier at waist level helps YOU retrieve the kitten for handling by giving you much better leverage and stability for taking control of the socializing situation.**

11. **Do not be in a hurry to set the kitten "free" in a room.** If you take this step too soon, you risk overwhelming the kitten and sliding back to square one. Only after you determine that the kitten feels comfortable enough being handled and held by you for longer and longer periods of time should you even consider putting them down on the ground.

Once you do allow them to walk around on their own outside the cage, do it slowly...one small piece of real estate at a time. Start with a couch or chair, or a corner of the room where you can keep them somewhat loosely confined and blocked from escape routes under furniture, etc. Use the interactive toys to keep the kitten focused on fun and not the relative enormity of the room. You should eliminate as many of the hiding spots as possible before you even let the kitten roam around. Should the kitten get scared and bolt for a hiding spot, the last thing you both need is to have your big hand grabbing and clawing at the kitten in order to pull it out from under the couch or from behind a stereo cabinet and wires.

As the kitten becomes more at ease with open space and overcomes the urge to bolt from you, let it explore a little...again, one piece of real estate at a time. Use this opportunity to get the kitten accustomed to you walking over to pick it up and put it back in another spot. I considered this part of socializing as making myself a pest. If you can pester and make yourself a general nuisance to the kitten at this point without having it dash for cover or hiss, etc., you're 99.9% home free. Increase the frequency and duration of these out-of-the-cage jaunts until the kitten can stay out in the open room most, if not all, of the day. Again, don't blow it by suddenly giving the kitten free run of the entire house. This could send you back to the Stone Age in terms of socializing. You've come a long way from the hissing furball in a cage stage. One room is plenty for a newly-tamed kitten, especially if outfitted with enough scratching posts, toys and fellow foster cats.

12. Use interactive toys to your advantage. They keep the kitten engaged during the hours you're not home and they provide a non-threatening way for you to connect with and engage the kitten during socialization time. If you keep them focused on a toy, the kittens tend to forget the fact that they are frightened and that a once scary human is attached to the other end. Over time, the kitten will come to realize it can actually have a good time even with you always there. Once they are convinced you're not going to kill them, the kittens will actually look forward to your company.

13. Look for signs that one kitten may be bonding better to his cage mates than he is to you. If this is the case and the kitten seems to be at a plateau, consider splitting it off from the pack. The goal is to make the kitten trust humans! They bond very well with their own kind without our help.

Separation is a good option for cases where one kitten seems to be well ahead of its cage mate, but is walking a fine line between taking its cues from you or its wilder, more cautious companion. Don't let these kittens slip back into their old comfort zone and feed off the anxieties of the others. Move them to another cage, room, or whatever to help them progress to the next level.

14. If you are working with more than one kitten and one seems to be farther along, use some "kitty jealousy" as a tool to motivate the less interactive kitten. Let the more timid one see you walking around with its buddy in your arms. Let the kitten see you playing happily with the other one outside the cage. Out of the corner of your eye you can see the timid cat watching you and the seemingly good and safe time his buddy is having. At some point, don't be surprised to see the more timid kitten actually reach out to you and/or the buddy and even meow for attention. At that point, you have won. In cases like this, curiosity gets the best of the kittens who are on the brink of making a turnaround but just need a little extra push. If it takes a little bit of "I want what he's/she's getting" to help a kitten turn the corner – do it.

15. Loud noises, commotion and sudden movements can set socializing progress back considerably depending upon how far along you are. If this happens while you're handling the cat, don't be surprised if it tries to bite, scratch and run away out of pure instinct and fear.

16. DO NOT GET DISCOURAGED! All kittens are different. What works for one might not work for another. Stay within the basic socializing guidelines but don't be afraid to improvise. If it works, don't knock it.