



YOUR FIRST KITTEN

So, you've made the exciting decision to share your life with a kitten – a commitment that could last for the next 14 to 15 years or longer! This is a serious undertaking and so you want to get off to the right start.

WHAT SHAPES A KITTEN'S PERSONALITY?

Think of the different cats you have come across in your life – some may have been very friendly, some nervous or fearful, some bold or inquisitive, and some perhaps aggressive. There are several factors that contribute to the development of these different personalities – their parents' temperaments; where they were born; how much human handling they have had; and what experiences they have had both at any early age and later in life.

Kittens' "sensitive" period takes place very early in kitten-hood – at around 3 weeks to 7-8 weeks old – before most kittens go to their permanent homes. During this time, the kitten hasn't yet learned to fear everything, and its mind is open to forming bonds with people and other animals, and can learn how to deal with new experiences without being overwhelmed by them. If kittens don't experience people or everyday "human" activities during these sensitive early weeks, they may never be able to see them as part of normal life.

So, a kitten which hasn't been handled by people, met dogs or experienced everyday things such as vacuum cleaners, doorbells, children laughing and screaming etc., may automatically find them very threatening. The cat may try to avoid any interaction with things it fears, such as hiding away or being aggressive if pursued to be stroked, which is often the case with kittens born to stray or feral cats, which don't meet people at an early age. Cats do continue to learn beyond 8 weeks of age, but if the fundamentals are missing there may be little or nothing to build upon. So a fearful kitten is likely to be a fearful cat, and no amount of love from an owner may have a great effect on this.

PEDIGREE CATS

There are many different breeds of pedigree cat, some of which will require extra care and attention, for example, daily grooming if they have a long coat. Some pedigree cats are more people orientated and may not like to be left alone for long periods. If you are out all day at work, it may be worth considering getting 2 kittens from the same litter for company. Research the breed you are interested in, but always make sure the health of the breed comes first rather than the "look" of the cat.

QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN CHOOSING A KITTEN:

- *What have the kittens experienced during their first 8 weeks of life?* Ideally the kittens will have experienced things associated with human living; different people – men / women / children; noises; smells; dogs etc.
- *What is the temperament of the mother cat and the father (if known)?*
- *If choosing a pedigree kitten – Is there a breed disposition for a certain type of behaviour?*
- *If purchasing from a breeder, ask how many cats they breed from in their establishment – breeders that are producing lots of kittens quickly, are unlikely to have spent lots of time handling and socialising kittens.*



WHEN VISITING THE KITTEN:

- Check for signs of ill-health such as runny eyes or nose, dirty ears, a pot belly or a sore area under the tail which may indicate diarrhoea. Kittens should look well with bright eyes, a good coat and be able to move easily. They should be alert and interactive.
- Ask to see the other kittens and the mother to make sure that they look healthy too.
- The breeder or rescue facility should be clean and hygienic to ensure the health of vulnerable kittens.
- Handle the kitten to assess how relaxed it is with people. Spend some time with it in case it is initially just a little wary but soon adapts, or whether it just wants to hide away. Watch how the whole litter react to you, each other and the environment, and look for a kitten that responds well in equal measures.
- Follow your instincts and be prepared to walk away. Don't purchase a kitten out of pity because it is ill, scared or kept in unfavourable conditions in order to "save" it. As hard as this sounds, you risk being left with a kitten that may have health or temperament problems for years to come, and may result in a difficult and disappointing relationship, whilst also inadvertently encouraging bad breeding practices to continue.

Remember to do your homework first before going to visit. A good breeder or rescue organisation will want to ensure you will care for your kitten properly and will happily give you lots of advice.