

Prevention of future behaviour problems: Kitten classes

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S U M M A R Y

By helping owners to understand feline behavioural development and communication it should be possible to educate them about why and when behaviour problems may occur and how they may be able to be prevented.

When a new kitten is introduced into the household it is important to set up for success by not allowing a kitten to have too many opportunities to make mistakes. By setting clear boundaries for acceptable behaviour as soon as possible after the kitten arrives and rewarding appropriate behaviour, rather than punishing unacceptable behaviour means a successful bond should develop and persist between the kitten and the owner.

KITTEN SOCIALISATION AND TRAINING CLASSES “KITTEN KINDY®”

This paper is based on a Lecture given at the FECAVA/ESAVA Continuing Education Course* Tallinn, March 2003

Kitten Kindy® is ideal for kittens under twelve to fourteen weeks of age to help them develop into manageable and social adult cats. Kittens should be no more than 14 weeks old when they finish the classes as kittens more than fourteen weeks old are likely to fight rather than socialise. They allow kittens to explore and learn to play with other

The advantages of puppy training are now well established and accepted. However, kittens can also benefit from such early handling and training. Cats require socialisation with members of their own species as well as humans and dogs if they are to become social members of the household. Studies have shown that early handling of kittens in a gentle, non-threatening manner is just as important for cats for their normal development.

Kitten Kindy® is an early socialisation, training and education programme designed to help owners and kittens start off on the right track together. The goal of Kitten Kindy® is to help prevent behavioural problems, educate owners on all aspects of raising a kitten and then live successfully with a cat in the family. They aim to establish a close bond between the cat, the owner and the veterinary practice.

It is another valuable service that veterinarians can offer their patients and clients.

kittens, play with toys and develop confidence in new surroundings. Hand-raised kittens or kittens from small litters appear to benefit a lot from these social interactions.

The classes also teach owners about normal feline behaviour, how to play and interact with their kittens and teach them how to prevent many problem behaviours.

Aims

The specific objectives of Kitten Kindy® will differ with the individual practice. However, the classes should aim:

- * To educate owners about normal feline behaviour
- * To teach owners about appropriate play
- * To socialise kittens so that they grow into manageable, easily handled adult cats.
- * To aid in the early identification of any problem behaviours and advise on their modification or management.

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A variety of scratching posts...



...and toys.

* To inform owners on the fundamentals of responsible pet ownership including behavioural development, pet care and living with a cat in the family.

Getting Started

The success of the programme depends on the support of all personnel within the practice. Everyone needs to have a basic understanding of what the classes are trying to achieve in order to recruit the kittens effectively.

A secure area of the hospital is needed to conduct the classes. It needs to be relatively large as it is transformed into a kitten gymnasium.

To run Kitten Kindy® a variety of items will be needed and these can include:

- * a variety of scratching posts - vertical and horizontal.
- * empty cardboard boxes for cubbies and hidey holes.
- * a variety of toys (for example air conditioning tubing that can act as a tunnel, ready made cat tunnels, ping-pong balls, toys tied to elastic or on poles, ready made toys such as Kitty Kongs, Bizzy Kittys™ or Cat Tracks etc).
- * cat baskets – different types.
- * litter trays – with a selection of litter types.
- * an indoor garden.

Classes are usually best conducted out of consulting hours. The end of the day, usually about 30 minutes after the clinic closes, is usually the best as most clients and staff find this convenient.

Structure

Although the basic principles of training are the same regardless of species, kittens are not small dogs so the classes can not be conducted in the same way as Puppy Preschool® classes.

The structure of the classes must suit the individual practice and the aim should be to recruit the kittens at the time of their first vaccination visit. The aims of the course should be outlined to the owners and ideally supplemented with some written material on kitten care and Kitten Kindy®.



An indoor garden.

Kitten Kindy® can be conducted for 1 hour each week and the course is generally best run for a 2-3 week period. They can also be conducted as a one night information session but this does not allow any follow up except over the phone.

All kittens attending class must have started their vaccination and worming programme and be aged between 8-12 weeks when they start. The minimum number of kittens for a class is three while the recommended maximum is six. The whole family should be encouraged to attend. Owners of cats older than 14 weeks are encouraged to attend without their cat so that they too can learn about feline behaviour.

Two people are usually necessary to conduct the class as that allows for better observation of the kittens and more effective control of the class.

Training

Learning is best in a safe, non-threatening environment. The emphasis is training for the future not on commands and as such it should be fun for all involved.

Reward based training (Operant conditioning) is used to teach kittens to perform a task or behaviour to obtain a reward.

The rewards used in class must be varied because some kittens are very timid and they are not used to eating from the hand. Treats such as dehydrated liver, Bar B Q chicken, cheese, meat, butter or vegemite can all be used. It helps if the kittens come to classes before a meal.

When teaching a new trick or exercise it is important to be very patient. Be consistent as not all kittens learn at the same rate. Each training session should be short, no more than 3-5 minutes at any one time.

CLASS OUTLINE OF KITTEN KINDY®

Class One

Registration:

All vaccination certificates should be checked and the kittens should be given a quick medical examination to detect conditions such as conjunctivitis or skin problems.

Introduction:

Initially all kittens should be in their baskets or cages with the owners seated next to them. An outline of what will be discussed in the class and any queries the owners want answered is useful.

Play:

The kittens are then released from their cages to interact if they want. They are not forced to socialise or play. Kittens can be left to investigate their surroundings for 15- 20 minutes while the instructor discusses the programme. However, it is important to carefully observe the kittens' behaviour and interactions to prevent any kittens from being frightened or bullied.

Training:

In each class basic commands can be taught. For example, cats can be taught to come, sit or a trick such as "give five".

However, the main aim is really to help owners understand their cat's behaviour and prevent behaviour problems from occurring.

Come:

Teaching kittens to come on command is easy as most kittens already respond to their owner's voice or the sound of the can opener. The kitten should always be rewarded for coming in response to his name and the word "come" and never punished if it does not obey. The owners should be encouraged to practice this exercise at home before every meal where there are few distractions.

Give the kitten a tiny treat and take a small step back. As the kitten follows keep rewarding it and call the kitten's name. When the kitten has done this a few times say "come" as it is walking towards you and reward the kitten immediately.

Handling Exercises:

Owners should be taught how to handle and restrain their kitten appropriately by a practical demonstration. This could



Training to sit with the help of a treat.

include holding kittens, trimming nails, grooming, bathing, and medicating using rewards for good behaviour.

In this session flea control, nutrition and dental care can also be discussed.

Litter Box Training:

The owners should be informed about basic litter box care including how often to change litter, how to clean litter boxes, where to place them, how many they need etc.

At the end of the class homework sheets should be handed out that repeat the advice given in the lessons.

Class Two

Welcome

Kittens should be given another physical check up to detect potential problems but also to habituate them to handling by the veterinary staff.

Questions that have arisen since the previous week should be answered and the plan for this class outlined.

Review:

"Come" and handling exercises are reviewed. Ideally all owners demonstrate one at a time with their own kitten. However as this is a strange environment for young kittens with many distractions and smells, the kittens may find it difficult to concentrate and fear may override the desire to eat and perform.

Training:

Sit:

The treat is held directly above the kitten's nose and slowly directed back over the kitten's head towards its rear end. As the kitten's head goes up and back, the bottom lowers to the ground. The kitten is rewarded as soon as its bottom hits the ground. This action should be repeated a few times before the word "sit" is introduced and the action and the word are paired together.

Teaching Tricks e.g. Give Me Five

This is a fun exercise and is similar to teaching a dog to shake hands. Kittens naturally lift their paws in response to the food being offered so this behaviour can be slowly shaped into “give me five” or “give me ten” in response to the command.

Walking On A Lead

Initially the kitten should be allowed to drag the leash around without holding on to the lead. Then the kitten is encouraged to walk and follow by using treats or wiggling a toy in front as you walk along.

Graduation:

Kitten Kindy® concludes with a small ceremony where every kitten receives a certificate of attendance as well as a “show bag” of goodies.

Benefits And Limitations Of Kitten Kindy®

All kittens and owners appear to benefit from attending the classes, some more than others. The kittens develop confidence and the owners learn that cats are trainable.

The classes help develop a strong bond between the client and the veterinary staff. They allow the opportunity to educate the owner that the veterinary hospital is more than

just a place for sick animals or for neutering and annual vaccination.

However, limitations of time mean that not all problems can be covered nor resolved in the allotted time. If problems persist, additional behavioural counselling should be given or the case can be referred to a qualified behaviour consultant.

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