

CHECKLIST FOR NEW KITTEN OWNERS

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There's a new kitten in your family and it's an exciting time. It's also a time when learning takes place. Your kitten has many things to learn but you do as well. How you set up the environment, interact with her, and training methods used are all important. To get you started, here is a list of some general essentials. If this is your first experience with a cat though, I strongly advise reading a good, comprehensive book on kitten and cat care because many details can't be covered in a single article. You'll need to:

- Safeguard your kitten from dangers in the home
- Bond with your kitten and begin the trust-building process
- Provide the right cat supplies
- Humanely train your new kitten
- Provide proper veterinary care
- Provide appropriate nutrition
- Create a healthy and enriched environment
- Learn about cat body language and communication

Learning these things will help ensure your kitten has a long, happy and healthy life. There are also easy training mistakes commonly made when raising kittens, so it's important to learn proper techniques. You can find my step-by-step training techniques as well as other information on raising your kitten in my books, *Think Like a Cat* (Penguin Books, 2011) and *CatWise* (Penguin Books, 2016).

Basic Equipment Needed

- Cat carrier (always transport your kitten in a sturdy, secure carrier)
- A sanctuary room to initially confine your new kitten
- Kitten food
- Fresh water
- Uncovered litter box (make sure the kitten can easily enter and exit)
- Scoopable, unscented litter
- Litter scoop
- Food bowl (kitten-sized)
- Water bowl (don't get a double food/water bowl. It's important to keep water separate)
- Scratching post (Choose a sturdy, sisal covered one)
- Safe toys for solo play (remove glued-on parts or anything a kitten may swallow)
- Interactive play toys (fishing pole design)
- Identification (microchip)
- Soft grooming brush
- Nail trimmers
- Comfy bed (a donut-shaped, or covered cat bed is usually best)

- Hiding places (a fabric cat tunnel, a box, etc)
- Cat tree (for climbing, perching and window viewing)
- Treats for training (you can also use kitten food)

The Veterinarian

Your kitten will need lifelong veterinary care. Even if she looks healthy, it's important to schedule a visit now. Depending on her age, she may need to begin or continue initial kitten vaccinations and deworming. Even if your new kitten is up-to-date on vaccinations, an initial visit to the veterinarian is important before bringing her home, especially if you have another cat at home.

Your veterinarian will guide you on the kitten's nutritional needs and recommended wellness visits. This is also a good opportunity to have the veterinarian or veterinary technician demonstrate how to trim your kitten's nails. Use this time to ask questions you may have as a new kitten parent.

The Safe Room

To your kitten, this new home environment is unfamiliar and big. It also looks like a great place to explore and unfortunately, your kitten doesn't know the difference between what is safe and what isn't. Depending on the size of your environment, it may be best to restrict your kitten to one room temporarily. This serves as a sanctuary or safe room. It can be an extra bedroom or any room you can close off. This lets the kitten can get her bearings without being overwhelmed.



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Your kitten, depending on her age, is also just learning about where to eliminate (litter box), where to scratch (scratching post), what's safe to climb (cat tree), and what's safe to explore. If you already have other pets at home, the sanctuary room will give the kitten a safe place to be while you begin a gradual introduction.

In the sanctuary room, you'll need a litter box, a vertical scratching post, hiding places (paper bags or boxes on their sides, or a cat tunnel), cozy places for napping, food and water (don't place these near the litter box).

Your kitten will also need toys. Leave out some toys for solo playtime that are kitten safe. No toys with strings or anything potentially dangerous. For interactive playtime, you'll need fishing pole-type toys. These are the toys that are used with your supervision. They also provide you the opportunity to be a part

of the game so the kitten associates you with the fun. Interactive toys always get put away when playtime is over.

If you already have a cat carrier, leave it out in the sanctuary room for your kitten to use as a hiding place. Line the carrier with a towel and your kitten will have a comfy hideaway. This also begins the training process of associating the carrier with something positive.

You can begin to introduce family members to the kitten while she's in the sanctuary room but do it in a way that doesn't overwhelm her. Your kitten may be excited and happy to experience more people or she may also be very frightened. Let your kitten set the pace when it comes to how quickly to expose her to people and life beyond the sanctuary room.

The amount of time your new kitten will have to be in the sanctuary room depends on her age, health, confidence, and whether there are other pets at home. If you have no other pets and your kitten seems comfortable and confident after about 24 hours, begin to let her explore the house a bit at a time. Make sure she knows where her litter box is located and can return to the safety of the sanctuary room any time she wants. If you have other pets at home then keep the kitten in the sanctuary room as you do a gradual, positive introduction. Safety matters most so don't rush this process. If she's a very young kitten, keep her confined to a smaller area until she gets comfortable and knows the location of her litter box. You don't want her getting lost in the house, especially when her bladder is full. If you have a larger home, set up multiple litter boxes so your kitten never has to travel far when nature calls.

Trust-Building

Begin the bonding process right from the start. Use an interactive toy (fishing pole design) to initiate what will hopefully become the start of twice-daily interactive play sessions together. Your kitten has so much energy and she's learning about her emerging skills. She needs to play, climb and jump. Playtime is a confidence builder. If you have a frightened kitten, then the fishing pole design of the toy helps create trust as it puts you at a distance so she can relax and enjoy the game. The interactive toy also lets you move the toy like prey so your kitten can focus on being the hunter.



Photo by Hiang Kanjinna on Unsplash

Bring other family members into the sanctuary room to get to know the kitten. Remember to let the kitten set the pace of how much interaction is desired. Don't have family members rush her or attempt to hold her if she's clearly giving signs that she's not ready. Trust-building can take time but it's worth it to establish a close bond. Remember, some kittens are eager to play and interact and some need a slow and gentle approach. Pay attention to your kitten's personality and needs. If she's timid, introduce one person at a time.

Kitten-Proofing the Home

To a kitten, every object in the home is basically fair game as a toy, climbing object, potential snack, or scratching surface. Your new kitten will also probably view your curtains and bookshelves as potential jungle gyms. Cats love vertical territory. A kitten can get into serious trouble by trying to wedge herself into the most non-cat-friendly places. Go room by room to kitten-proof. There are things in almost every

room that could be harmful so look at each area from a kitten's perspective. For example, something such as a laundry basket may seem very uninteresting, but she could crawl into a pile of dirty laundry and hide there. You may unknowingly scoop up the clothes and toss them in the washer. Always put each piece of laundry into the washer separately. Check the washer and dryer before running and then again after emptying before closing the doors.



Photo by Vincent Ghilione on Unsplash

Watch out for things such as yarn, string, rubber bands, and other light objects that a kitten might view as a toy. Cats have backward-facing barbs on their tongues that are used in the wild to remove meat from the bones of prey. They also help when a cat is grooming herself. The barbs give the tongue that rough texture. Because of the backward-facing barbs, items the cat puts in her mouth end up getting swallowed. She can't dislodge items such as string or yarn and this can lead to choking as well as potential deadly intestinal blockage. String, yarn, thread or rubber bands should never be left out. You may have thought yarn was a good kitten toy since there are so many images of kittens playing with balls of yarn but it's actually potentially deadly. If you notice thread hanging from the backside of your kitten, never pull it because a needle might be attached. Take the kitten to the veterinarian or emergency clinic right away.

Here's a list of some kitten-proofing that will need to be done for safety:

- Keep windows closed unless secured with sturdy pet screening
- Don't leave any medicine or pill containers out
- Put away yarn, needles, pins, string, ribbon, rubber bands or things that can be swallowed
- Keep household cleaners in cabinets
- Use trash cans with lids or place them in closed cabinets
- Snip handles off paper bags before offering as toys
- Never let your kitten play with plastic bags
- Secure tiny openings where a kitten could get stuck
- Secure dangling electrical cords with cord containment strips or ties
- Coat dangling electrical cords with bitter apple anti-chew product
- Keep breakable objects out of reach or secure them with earthquake wax
- Check washer and dryer before running
- Check closets, drawers and cabinets before closing
- Keep household plants out of reach because almost all are toxic to cats
- Close sewing basket after use and check for pins on the carpet
- No burning candles in a room where the kitten can access
- Since cats love to hide in boxes, double-check before tossing any box in the trash
- Be careful when opening doors to the outside to prevent a kitten from dashing out

The above is just a small sample of kitten-proofing. Adjust your responsibilities, based on how your home is set up. This may initially seem as if it involves so much work but remember that your kitten will outgrow many of these behaviors. If you have children, you certainly remember all you had to do to baby-proof in the beginning. By the way, you can find products to help with kitten-proofing such as electrical cord covers, outlet covers, cabinet locks, and toilet paper roll covers, in the baby safety section of stores, as well as through online retailers.

The Litter Box

Your kitten is still learning so keep the litter box set-up conveniently located and easy to use. The sides of the box should be low enough for her to easily enter and exit. As your kitten grows you can then change out the box for a higher sided one but for now, keep everything very easy for her to understand.

Kittens don't have the bladder control of adult cats yet so your new furry family member may have trouble remembering the location of the box or she might not realize she has to urinate until it's rather urgent. Litter boxes need to be easy to find (no covers and make sure they're out in the open and not hidden in closets or cabinets). You can also guide your kitten to the box (gently) at times when elimination normally occurs such as after meals, napping or play sessions. Never force her in the box.

Cat Carrier

Start carrier training early. All-too-often, the only time a cat sees the carrier is when it's time for the trip to the veterinary clinic. Help your kitten become comfortable with travel by taking her on short car rides. When not in use, keep the carrier out for the kitten to use as an extra bed. This will also help her associate the carrier with positive experiences. Do carrier training early and it will pay off when your kitten becomes an adult, so you don't end up having to shove an angry cat into the carrier.

Kitten Food

Begin by purchasing the appropriate bowls. Choose bowls that are kitten-sized. In a multicat home, each cat should have their own food bowls. Cats are not social eaters. It can be incredibly stressful to ask cats to share one bowl.

As for the type of food, your kitten will need a growth formula. If you have other cats, don't let them eat the kitten food and don't allow your kitten to eat adult formula food. Feed the food that's appropriate for each cat's life stage and health condition. Your veterinarian can guide you on specifics when it comes to nutrition.

Your kitten will need to eat several meals a day and your veterinarian can advise how often and how much to feed based on age and health.

Your Kitten Needs Water

Have fresh, clean water available all the time. Don't use a double feeder for food and water and don't place a water bowl right next to the food bowl. Most cats don't like food and water in close proximity. If you have larger pets at home, don't just put out one giant water bowl. Your kitten needs a water bowl that's the right size for her. She doesn't want to drink from a bowl that seems the size of a swimming pool.

Should Your Kitten Drink Milk?

You may have heard that cats love milk but they shouldn't have it, nor do they need it after being weaned. Once weaned, cats become lactose intolerant. Giving milk to a cat can result in diarrhea. In a kitten,

diarrhea can easily lead to dehydration and that can be fatal. If the kitten you have is orphaned and not on solid food yet, your veterinarian will recommend a kitten milk replacement formula. Do not offer regular cow's milk. Unless your veterinarian says your kitten needs replacement formula, you should be feeding kitten formula food and offering fresh, clean water. Skip the milk.

Scratching Post

Scratching is a vital part of cat life. Your kitten's claws may seem to be out all the time but as she matures, she'll learn to keep them sheathed. Start the scratching post training right away. Your kitten needs to be able to scratch so get her started by providing an appealing scratching post. The scratching post needs to be tall, sturdy, and covered in a rough material. Most cats prefer sisal as an appealing scratching texture. Don't buy a carpet-covered post because it won't meet your kitten's needs and she may start eyeing the furniture. Stick to sisal. Put the scratching post in a convenient location for your kitten to it's easy to find. Multiple scratching posts would be a wise investment so you can place them in areas where your kitten tends to hang out. Some cats also enjoy horizontal scratching and for that you can get corrugated cardboard scratching pads. They're very inexpensive and cats love them.



Photo by Pam Johnson-Bennett

Let's talk about declawing because it might be something you're considering. Cats can easily be trained to scratch on scratching posts and not on the furniture. Scratching is emotionally and physically important to cat welfare so please don't put your kitten through such an inhumane procedure. Many declawed cats continue to feel pain long after declaw surgery and some develop litter box issues due to the long-term discomfort of standing on litter. Take the time to train your cat to scratch on the post by providing the most appealing scratching post and placing it where she wants to scratch. Do not declaw.

Cat Trees and Perches



Photo by Nada Elmekawi on Unsplash

Your kitten loves to jump and climb and that's an important part of how she's learning about her skills and developing her balance. The addition of a sturdy cat tree in the home will give her a safe place to play, exercise, sleep, climb and perch. A good quality cat tree may seem expensive at first but it's a good investment and will last a long time.

You can also add a window perch in an area where there isn't room for a cat tree. Just make sure the perch is sturdy and securely attached. Cat shelves and cat walkways are also very popular. If you choose shelves or walkways, make sure they are covered with a non-slip material.

Grooming and Nail Trims

Start this process now so you don't end up battling with an adult cat who tries to flee whenever she sees the brush or nail clippers. If you have a short-haired kitten, get a soft brush and start brushing her every day for just a minute or two. With a long-haired cat, daily brushing is a must to prevent matting. During

the grooming session, gently touch her ears and mouth to help her get comfortable with the process. This will pay off later in life so you can brush her teeth, clean her ears or if medication must be administered.

Your kitten's nails will need regular trims. If you've never trimmed a kitten's nails before, ask your veterinarian to demonstrate how it's done. If you begin the process when your cat is a kitten and you keep the experience short and positive, it will make this so much easier as she grows into an adult.

There's a blood supply that runs through the nail so it's critical to only snip the very tip. If you cut too much you will cause bleeding and pain. If you're at all unsure how to do nail trimming, please talk with your veterinarian. You can also find video demonstrations from veterinarians on *YouTube*.

The tool you will need is a nail trimmer made especially for cat nails. Don't use dog nail trimmers and don't use trimmers meant for human nails.

Enrichment

Being an indoor kitty is safest for your kitten. That said, when she's kept inside exclusively it's important to ensure you've provided an environment that is fun and stimulating while at the same time safe and comfortable. Provide the fun aspect of the outside in an indoor environment. An indoor cat tree provides the same vertical territory and climbing fun as an outdoor tree. A sturdy sisal-covered scratching post will mimic the texture of an actual tree or outdoor post for effective scratching. Cat shelves and window perches provide visual vantage points similar to sitting on top of an outdoor fence. A cat's world is very vertical as opposed to our horizontal way of living, so keep that mind as you look around your environment. If you want to keep your kitten from climbing the curtains or scaling your bookshelf, provide safe alternative options.



Photo by Ashley Anthony for Unsplash

Provide safe toys for solo playtime but also engage your kitten in at least two interactive play sessions per day. In an outdoor environment, a cat would attempt about 12 hunts for prey. Cats were born to hunt so

create those opportunities through playtime. Don't just leave a bunch of fuzzy fake mice in a toy basket, but instead, hide them around the house in interesting places such as sitting on the edge of a window perch or peeking out from under furniture. Give your kitten opportunities to explore and hunt.

Puzzle feeders provide an opportunity for playtime where the kitten gets a little food reward for a job well done. You can find puzzle feeders for cats online or you can make your own. Visit our website at catbehaviorassociates.com for more specifics on puzzle feeders.

Kittens need playtime and the opportunity for exploration. If you set up your indoor environment to be stimulating and cat-friendly now, it will last throughout your cat's lifetime.

Socialization

Socialize your kitten to people, sounds and experiences. Do this early to help your kitten accept change, unfamiliar people, handling and different experiences as she grows into an adult. Gently and positively get your kitten comfortable with being in a carrier and going on short car rides. Expose your kitten to gentle handling from visitors in the home. As mentioned previously, get started on grooming your kitten so she'll be comfortable with being touched as an adult cat.

Kitten Training

Start the training process now, and be positive, humane, and consistent. Training now will pay off greatly as your youngster grows into a full-grown cat. Never punish when training your kitten. She's not misbehaving, she's doing normal, natural cat behaviors. Your job is to provide better alternatives. For example, never use your fingers as toys so your kitten won't learn the habit of biting skin. If your kitten scratches the sofa, don't punish her because scratching is a normal and vital cat behavior. Instead, place a sisal scratching post next to it and cover the corner of the sofa with *Sticky Paws* (a double-stick tape made for this purpose). This way, you'll provide your kitten with a better option.

When training, it's important to look at behavior from a cat's point of view. What is the cat trying to accomplish and how can you offer her an acceptable option? Thinking like a cat when training will help you establish a stronger bond.

Need More Help?

For more specific information on kitten training and behavior, refer to my books, *Think Like a Cat* and *CatWise*, which cover in-depth kitten training and behavior. The books are available at bookstores everywhere, through your favorite online book retail site and on the website, catbehaviorassociates.com. If you have a question regarding your kitten's health, please contact your veterinarian.

This article is not intended as a replacement for your cat's veterinary care and is not dispensing medical advice.

About Pam Johnson-Bennett, CCBC

Pam is a Certified Cat Behavior Consultant and best-selling author of 8 books on cat behavior. She starred in the Animal Planet series *Psycho Kitty*, seen in Canada and the UK. She was vice

president of the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants and founded their Cat Division, where she served 8 years as Chair. She has served on advisory boards for the American Humane Association as well as other animal welfare organizations. She lectures internationally on cat behavior and makes frequent television and radio appearances. Previously, she was the cat behavior columnist for Cats magazine, Modern Cat magazine, The Daily Cat, and Cat Fancy online. She was also the resident cat behavior expert for Yahoo and iVillage online. She is considered a pioneer in the field of cat behavior consulting, having started her career in 1982. Some of her books are used as textbooks in behavior courses and she has influenced many practicing in the field today. Her ground-breaking book, *Think Like a Cat*, is considered the cat bible by veterinarians, shelters, and cat owners worldwide.

Pam owns Cat Behavior Associates, LLC, a veterinarian-referred cat behavior consultation business in Nashville, TN.