

How to Help your Unsocial Kitten

Your unsocial kitten may hiss, hide and sometimes swat and/or bite. These are all expressions of fear. The way to help is to be gentle, calm and confident - and have lots of time and patience!

It is very important that under socialized kittens are kept strictly indoors. They need to receive appropriate handling and slow exposure to normal sights and sounds while they are still young. Sometimes, under socialized kittens will flourish with familiar people but they may always be shy with strangers.

The Right Environment

Ideally, keep your kitten in a wire crate. Set up the crate in a quiet, indoor area. Make sure the crate is off of the floor. Your kitten will feel safer if she's higher up and can see her surroundings. She will need a litter box at one end of the crate and bedding, toys, food and water at the other.

When you bring your kitten home, give her an initial two-day adjustment period before trying to socialize with her. The change of scenery can be stressful and overwhelming. During this time, move slowly and talk softly to her when bringing food. Quietly play soft music or have the TV/radio on at a low volume so your kitten can get used to people's voices and sounds.

After a couple of days, you can turn up your TV or radio one notch and slowly work up to normal volume. If there aren't other pets around, you can start bringing her crate into your living room or kitchen for an hour or two, so your kitten can begin to see and hear other areas of the home.

Socialize With Food

Use positive reinforcement and associate yourself with good things. Have water and dry kitten food always available, but when you give your kitten wet food, stay in the room. Your kitten will learn to associate you with food and start to look forward to your interactions. Over time, move the food plate closer to your body until the plate is in your lap and your kitten is climbing on you to get the food.

Pet the kitten for the first time while she is eating. Start petting her face and cheeks and work up to petting her all over. Take your time building up to holding her on your lap and always reward with wet food. Don't offer your kitten food on your finger though, and don't encourage them to play with your hand or bite or scratch you. They may be small now, but this will not be the case for long.

Socialize With Play and Holding

Playing with kittens can help them build trust with people. The more you play, the faster they will learn to relax and trust you. Once you've spent enough time with your kitten that she lets you hold her, hold her as much as possible. Make sure she is close to your body so she feels safe. If a kitten is still trying to scratch you, lightly (but snugly) wrap her in a towel with only her head out and hold her while doing things around the house. Ideally, you should hold and gently pet your kitten ten times a day for five minutes each time. You can combine this with watching TV, reading, etc.

If you have two kittens, make sure to spend some quality time with each one separately.

Once your kitten able to fall asleep on your lap or purr around you, she can move from the crate to a kitten proof room and slowly be allowed more access to your home. Make sure she knows where her litter box is and do not allow her into a room where she can hide out of your reach until she comes to you readily.

New People and Pets

Once your kitten is doing better with you and your immediate family, you can start to introduce her to your friends. Remember to instruct others how to appropriately handle your kitten so not to frighten her. As long as all are healthy, you can also introduce your kitten to your other pets, but keep a close eye to make sure everyone gets along.

Remember the key points:

- Lots of gentle handling, picking up, holding, petting all over body
- Plenty of play time with you
- Hand feeding
- Slow exposure to normal sights and sounds of your home
- Gradual increase of living area
- Handling by strangers
- Positive and gentle exposure to other kitten-friendly pets

Need Help? Call our free Pet Behavior Help Line (503) 416-2983.