



TEACH THEM YOUNG

Kitten socialization classes can set the stage for improved behavior at home and in the clinic.



BEST BEHAVIOR

School Is in Session: Kittens Only!

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A fractious adult cat enters the veterinary clinic for routine care, leading to increased stress levels for everyone and increased risk to staff safety. Elsewhere, a fearful adult cat is relinquished to a shelter for behavior problems, including aggression and scratching furniture. Both scenarios are common and unfortunate.^{1,2} But what if both scenarios could have been prevented and the cats could have been helped by a veterinary facility providing true wellness care that focuses on preventing physical and behavioral concerns and prioritizes a cat's unique needs? Such a veterinary facility would offer kitten socialization classes, a strategy that helps educate clients, develop resilient cats, and maximize welfare for all.



Even though cats are more common than dogs as household pets, historically they are taken to the veterinarian less often than dogs.³ Clients often describe the overwhelming struggle of getting the cat to the veterinary practice, compounded by stress during the visit.⁴ One way to decrease the fear, anxiety, and stress associated with veterinary visits is carrier training.⁵ Other ways are pilling practice, nail trims, and grooming, all skills that kittens can learn in class. Kittens with these skills become less stressed adult patients with more reliable physiologic parameters, will be easier to handle, and will be more compliant for examinations and prescribed treatments.

WHY SHOULD KITTENS ATTEND?

Kitten classes are not fluff or a silly idea dreamed up for “crazy cat ladies.” Classes are research-based programs that provide kittens with guided exploration of objects and the environment as well as supervised group play. Client attendees benefit from learning about a cat’s needs, body language, normal and abnormal behavior, how to modify behaviors, and how to help provide low-stress health and husbandry care. Clients in class have more time to share their concerns and get expert help. This additional service helps bond clients to the practice and reminds them to consult their veterinarian should they have future concerns versus getting haphazard advice from “Dr. Google.”

Structured positive exposure during the socialization phase can promote resiliency in cats. In addition, if clients are properly educated about providing a healthy environment and positive reinforcement–based training for their cat, behavior problems and relinquishment risks decrease.^{6,7} Preventing relinquishment maintains the human-animal bond as well as the hospital’s client base. Cats that easily accept treatments can receive more thorough veterinary care, thereby improving their health and increasing clinic revenue.

WHEN SHOULD KITTENS ATTEND?

Kitten classes capitalize on a kitten’s sensitive development stage, when they are most receptive to engaging and learning from social and environmental situations. The primary socialization phase is from 2 to 7 weeks, but clinics can enroll kittens up to 12 weeks of age. Beyond 14 weeks, kittens can still benefit from training, but they often become wary and potentially aggressive toward unfamiliar cats,⁸ which is why it is valuable for kittens to learn how to communicate with

BOX 1

Feline Behavior Resources

- Beaver BV, ed. *Feline Behavior: A Guide for Veterinarians*. 2nd ed. St. Louis, MO: Elsevier Science; 2003.
- Shaw J, Martin D, eds. *Canine and Feline Behavior for Veterinary Technicians and Nurses*. 15th ed. Oxford, UK: Wiley Blackwell; 2015.
- Turner D, Bateson P, eds. *The Domestic Cat: The Biology of Its Behaviour*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; 2013.
- American Association of Feline Practitioners. Feline Behavior Guidelines. catvets.com/public/PDFs/PracticeGuidelines/FelineBehaviorGLS.pdf
- Karen Pryor Academy. Better Vet Visits. karenpryoracademy.com/courses/better-vet

other cats while young, especially if the client plans to ever add another cat to the family.

WHERE SHOULD CLASSES BE HELD?

Holding kitten classes in the veterinary clinic is ideal because then the kittens learn to associate the veterinary sights, sounds, and smells with positive events. Another benefit is practice riding in a carrier and car. Whenever in-person sessions are not possible, virtual classes can benefit older kittens, and some clinics may prefer to blend virtual and in-person attendance to extend the skills taught and reach more patients.

WHICH KITTENS ARE ELIGIBLE?

All kittens meeting the age and health requirements should be enrolled in class. Especially important is enrolling kittens at higher risk for future behavioral problems, such as singleton/bottle-raised kittens, kittens from feral or severely stressed queens, and kittens that received inadequate early nutrition (including in utero).^{9,10} During class, kittens are observed in social settings, thereby enabling the instructor to identify any behaviors needing extra attention (e.g., avoiding interactions, lacking interest in



play and food, shirking away from touch, hissing, fearing the carrier and/or veterinary tools).

HOW DO WE START?

After you decide to host kitten classes at your facility, you will need to make a number of decisions. Fortunately, many books and webinars on feline behavior are available for study and reference (**BOX 1**).

Step 1: Identify who will teach the course. Veterinary nurses are a great option. Teaching affords extra client education opportunities, which many veterinary nurses enjoy. Kittens are a great morale booster, even at the end of a tough day, and teaching allows veterinary nurses to expand their skills and expertise. After a veterinary nurse is chosen, the practice can host a lunch-and-learn session to discuss the new service. Concerns can be addressed and enthusiasm generated. Messaging examples for each team member's role can be created so that everyone feels confident about engaging clients with regard to the class. Team members can be invited to observe the class, if desired, and to participate for free if they have a kitten.

Step 2: Allot time for veterinary nurses to prepare and teach classes. Instructors will need to become proficient with a number of things, such as:

- Feline body language
- Desensitization and counterconditioning techniques (to properly introduce carriers and veterinary tools)
- Classic and operant conditioning methods (to train helpful behaviors such as coming when called and to redirect undesired behaviors such as scratching)
- Specific needs of house cats
- Prevention and management of common feline behavior problems
- Effective client-communication tools

Step 3: Agree on reimbursement. Some clinics pay veterinary nurses their regular hourly rate to teach kitten classes, and others pay a percentage based on the number of enrolled clients.

Step 4: Determine a class schedule. Facilities need to decide if they want to host open enrollment/continuously rotate weekly classes (this schedule allows more opportunities to reach appropriately aged kittens) and if they want to blend in-person with virtual classes. Another scheduling opportunity is offering an educational webinar or virtual classes covering many of the same topics but for adult cats.



FIGURE 1. Learning to willingly and calmly ride in carriers should be a goal of kitten socialization classes.

Step 5: Set fees. Kitten class fees will vary by region and clientele income. Some clinics charge a nominal fee, recognizing that classes are a client/patient builder rather than a profit center. The benefits for the clinic include increasingly cooperative patients and dedicated clients, leading to additional income generated over the lifetime of the pet. Other clinics charge a larger fee to directly cover the veterinary nurse's time, supplies, overhead, and to make a profit. As a new service, some practices may choose to offer a lower promotional fee that can be raised later, based on demand.

Step 6: Recruit clients/kittens. The best recruiting technique is delivering consistent and repetitive messages throughout a client's visit. The client care team can mention classes when scheduling the first kitten visit; veterinary assistants or veterinary nurses can mention them again when they check in the patient and gather a history; the veterinarian can recommend the class during the examination; and the client can be enrolled during checkout. Some practices may offer incentives for kitten class graduates, such as discounts on nail trims, which may help sway undecided clients. Kitten classes can be advertised in many ways.

- Pictures of kittens enjoying class can be displayed on exam room/lobby televisions.
- Spring newsletters and social media posts are a great way to alert clients before "kitten season."
- Graduate photos can be shared on social media; clients love seeing their pet highlighted, and this technique doubles as advertising.
- Potential clients can learn about kitten classes on the clinic's website, especially if they are comparing various clinic services.
- Flyers in the lobby alert clients without kittens that



classes exist so they can share this unique offering with their friends.

Clinics that offer discounts for a shelter pet's first examination should advertise kitten classes to these new clients. Cat breeders in the area should also receive the message that your practice offers kitten classes so that potential new clients can be guided to your facility. Local dog trainers should also be alerted to your class offering as many of their clients may also have kittens.

Step 7: Set goals to share with clients. During class your kitten will learn:

- To get into the carrier willingly and calmly while traveling to the veterinary clinic (**FIGURE 1**)
- About grooming and veterinary care
- To be more comfortable about novel experiences
- How to communicate with other cats

During class the client will learn:

- Simple prevention and management techniques for common cat behavior concerns

- Easy training techniques so the cat accepts grooming and health care without a fight
- What cats need in order to be healthy and happy in your home
- Safe and effective introduction between their kitten, other animals, and people
- Quick, fun cat tricks

WHAT WILL WE NEED?

Classes are usually offered for 4 weeks, 1 hour per class. You should establish a complete class schedule before the first session (**TABLE 1**). Kittens need to meet certain requirements, and clinics should have certain items on hand for demonstration or training purposes (**BOX 2**).

SUMMARY

Offering kitten classes is a bonus service with many benefits to all involved. The knowledge gained by veterinary nurses while preparing to instruct will improve their cat handling and feline behavior skills.

TABLE 1 Sample Class Schedule (4 weeks, 1 hour/class)

TOPIC	WEEK 1*	WEEK 2	WEEK 3	WEEK 4
Environmental exploration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Body language discussion (10 min) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Body language discussion (10 min) 		
Health care practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lure onto the scale (5 min) ● Mock exam/body handling (5 min) ● Paw handling, exposure to clippers (5 min) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Oral medication practice (5 min) ● Grooming (based on coat type/breed needs) (5 min) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Nail trims (5 min) ● Toothbrushing (5 min) ● Conditioning to a treatment station (5 min) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Eye drops (5 min) ● Ear cleaning (5 min) ● Gentle towel restraint (5 min)
Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Entering the crate/closing the door (5 min) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Nose targeting (5 min) ● Train to sit (5 min) ● Carrier practice (5 min) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● High-5 (5 min) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Coming when called (5 min)
Discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Litter box planning and hygiene (10 min) ● Counter climbing prevention and management (5 min) ● Biting and scratching management (10 min) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Meeting a cat's needs (e.g., resting, playing, climbing, perching, scratching, hiding) (10 min) ● Toy types and safe play methods; exercise and bonding (10 min) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Cat-cat introductions (10 min) ● Cat-dog introductions (10 min) ● Common behavior problems (your vet can help with these). Reach out early: house soiling, destructiveness, aggression toward people/cats (10 min) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Adolescent and adult cat behavior changes (10 min) ● Common health problems: signs to watch for (10 min) ● Kids and cats: building a relationship (10 min)
Videos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Nail trims 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Toothbrushing ● Conditioning to a treatment station 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Leash walking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Creating a "catio"

*Carrier and car travel video links (URLs) are sent to clients before classes begin.



BOX 2

Kitten Class Requirements

For Kittens

- At least 2 weeks postadoption
- 8–12 weeks of age
- 1 FVRCP vaccine at least 7 days before class
- Negative fecal result
- Negative retrovirus (FeLV/FIP) test results
- Inspect each kitten before class, for signs of upper respiratory illness.

If a kitten does not meet all of the above criteria, the kitten can play at home while the clients attend the class, or both can attend a virtual class.

For Clinics

- Carriers of different types
- Tunnels
- Scratching posts for climbing and perching
- Cardboard boxes
- Toys
 - Wands, grab toys, various other cat toys
 - Kids' toys that roll and make noise and other objects to explore
- Treats
 - Puzzle feeders
 - High-value treats (e.g., tuna, clam juice, whipped cream, freeze-dried treats, crunchy treats, churro)
- Pet-pilling device and oral syringes
- Plastic spoons
- Brushes
- Nonslip mat
- Kitten scale
- Litter boxes
- Nail trimmers
- Feline pheromone products
- Target stick
- Collars, harnesses, and leashes

FeLV=feline leukemia virus; FIP=feline infectious peritonitis; FVRCP=feline viral rhinotracheitis, calicivirus, and panleukopenia

Classes do not require expensive supplies or a large dedicated space and can generate revenue. Clients may bond with the practice through shared experiences and learning. Kittens will become more resilient adults through strategic handling, and clinic staff will be safer and more educated regarding cats. All in all, kitten

classes are a low-risk, high-benefit service that demonstrates your practice's commitment to behavioral health and the high priority that you place on cats. **TVN**

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