

Stages of Kitten Development

By Virginia Clemans, DVM

Watching kittens play and grow can be a very satisfying experience. They seem to be little live wires one minute, sleeping angels the next. It's important to spend a lot of time with your new kitten to build his or her social skills. This time with your kitten includes feeding time (three to four times a day until the age of 12 weeks), play time, and petting time.



Newborn kittens are just like newborn humans – they are very dependent upon their mother. Separation from their mother at too early an age (before four to five weeks) can lead to aggression and decreased ability to learn. Between the ages of one to two weeks, kittens start hearing sounds and are able to orient toward those sounds. Their eyes are starting to develop and are usually open by two weeks of age.

By the time kittens are three weeks old, their sense of smell is almost fully developed and they can see well enough to locate their mother. By the fourth week, their sense of hearing is fully developed and you will notice some interaction with their littermates. Their teeth are beginning to erupt and they are learning to walk fairly well.

Sight is fully developed by week five, so now they are beginning to play, avoid obstacles, and pounce on “prey.” They will begin to groom themselves and each other. By week seven, kittens have adapted to adult sleep patterns. They are usually fully weaned from their mother about that time, but may occasionally suckle their mother or each other for comfort.

The most active play period for kittens is during weeks seven through fourteen. They are continuing to develop their physical coordination and social skills. They learn from their mother, other kittens or cats, or their human caretakers. They will begin to play with toys, chase their tails, leap and pounce.

By six months of age, kittens are “teenagers.” They will begin to work out their ranking in the household with other cats, dogs, and humans. If not spayed or neutered, they will begin to show sexual behavior (so it's a good idea to make sure your kitten is spayed or neutered before then).

Kittens take a lot of patience and care to see them through to adulthood. They need play time, rest time, a healthy diet (which includes a high-quality food and plenty of fresh water), and regular veterinary care. All of these things contribute to raising a healthy, happy, well-adjusted cat.

Dr. Virginia Clemans was Best Friends' chief veterinarian from 2001 to 2004. She now resides in Salt Lake City, where she is chief of staff for the Utah County Fix, a low-cost, high-volume spay/neuter and vaccine clinic sponsored by No More Homeless Pets in Utah, Maddie's Fund and Best Friends Animal Society.