



Kitten Socialisation Plan Toolkit



ADCH Toolkits

ADCH Minimum Welfare and Operational Standards relating to this Toolkit

specific guidance can be found in the Standards Booklet.

29	All puppies and kittens shall be adequately and appropriately socialised and habituated to prevent fear behaviour towards animals, situations, environments and people. A daily socialisation programme ensuring this shall be followed.
49	Feral (glossary 9) (unsocialised, unowned) cats are not suitable to be kept as companion animals and therefore there shall be no attempt to socialise them to humans. For socialisation to be most effective, it must occur for the whole duration of a cat's sensitive period (i.e. starting from the age of 2 weeks, up until at least 7/8 weeks of age). No attempt should be made to socialise an adult cat or kitten that is consistently (i.e. longer than a few days) fearful or distressed in the presence of humans, even if they are under 8 weeks of age.

How to use this Toolkit

This toolkit has been developed to help you create the policies and procedures you will need to meet the ADCH Minimum Standards.

Policies and procedures are personalised for every centre, site and situation and you will need to adapt the generic policy to suit your circumstances and work through the toolkit to create a comprehensive procedure for your team to use.

Further support and ideas can found on the ADCH Website and Member Facebook Group.



General policy for your kitten socialisation plan

All kittens in our care will receive a socialization programme during their critical socialisation period, between 2 and 7 weeks of age. 'Socialisation' is about learning social skills with other living beings, and 'habituation' is about learning to feel safe around and ignore everyday sights, sounds and things a kitten will encounter in its environment.

By helping kittens build positive associations with everyday experiences, it will give them a great start in life.

Introduction

True socialisation and habituation requires multiple good experiences with the same or similar things, for example going into the cat carrier once does not mean that the kitten has learnt that the cat carrier is a safe and comfortable place. Depending on the presence and temperament of the queen, the litter should be interacted with and socialised in her presence to promote positive socialisation and to maintain a degree of familiarity for the kittens. Handling in the presence of the mother and littermates will also help this to be a positive experience for your kittens. However, if your female cat has been poorly socialised and reacts with hostility to the presence of people, this will adversely influence the socialisation process and it would be advisable to exclude her from the room while her kittens are being handled.

Below are suggestions for the levels of socialisation and habituation required whether you have a newborn litter of kittens, an older litter, or a single kitten.

These actions are to be taken every day of every week, and importantly the chart provided in this toolkit is a guide. Anyone practicing socialisation needs to take it at the kitten's pace, as they respond to it, kitten socialisation is more than a 'tick box' exercise. Similarly, if a kitten from "outside" comes into a rescue at 5 weeks that the person doing the socialisation just starts at the 5 week marker.



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Guidance

Remember never to force an interaction, do not expect the kitten to deal with things for prolonged periods and if the kitten becomes overwhelmed or frightened by something allow them to retreat from the situation if they need to. Initial exposure to anything new should be at a suitable distance or intensity.

Kittens that have had no prior socialisation, but come into rescue at an age where they still might socialise to people and habituate to the domestic environment requires in depth knowledge, pragmatic practices and decision making in place as to whether socialisation is realistic, or whether the kitten should be neutered and a non-domestic home sought.

When working with multiple litters in a rescue environment you must ensure you follow your organisation's infection control protocols.

When introducing exposure to other animals, their welfare needs must also be respected and the animals used must be chosen with this in mind.

Template procedure

The following personnel have taken the necessary training to take part in the socialisation programme:	
Our lead/supervisor for socialisation programmes is:	
Our kittens are housed in our centre / foster homes	Foster homes / Our centre
Before carrying out any part of the socialisation programme, appropriate PPE is worn and hands are thoroughly washed to prevent the spread of disease to the litter. The barrier nursing protocol is followed when kittens are housed in centres.	
When introducing the scent of:	[inset scent from table below]
We use:	[insert where scent is taken from]
When introducing other animals:	[inset animal from table below. This must be at a distance with the utmost consideration for the animal's own welfare]
We use:	[insert how suitable animals are found]
We source our volunteers to act as an introduction to people in different scenarios:	

Socialisation and Habituation Schedule

The Kitten Socialisation and Habituation Schedule can be used as a weekly checklist for a kitten's socialisation and habituation experiences and can be tailored to the age of the kitten. Remember that kittens will react differently to things depending on the time of day, the amount of sleep they have had or how they are feeling that day – some days they can be a little more wary of the world than on other days.

The template checklist at the end of this document is reproduced with kind permission from Cats Protection and Dr Rachel Casey. This runs from 2 weeks, indicating the activities that are suitable in each week. Where a kitten remains with the rescue at 8 weeks, and beyond, this allows you to continue socialisation and monitoring until the kitten leaves the rescue.

Further information

The Cats Protection website features further information and playable sounds for socialisation of kittens: <https://www.cats.org.uk/help-and-advice/pregnancy-and-kitten-care/kitten-socialisation>

Timetable

Weeks 1 and 2

Ensure the mum is familiar with anyone who is going to handle her kittens. Give her plenty of freedom to take care of her kittens and do not do anything that is going to stress her or cause her to worry about her kittens. Do not force her to leave her kittens if she does not want to.

You can provide some positive experiences for the kittens during this time:

Gentle stroking and handling from 2 weeks, very briefly at first and then gradually building up the time spent with each kitten.

You can also start to play at low volume a CD, or the Cats Protection website sound library, with different household and real –life sounds

Weeks 3 – 7

Now the kittens become more active and curious about their littermates and their environment. Kittens still have a strong attachment to their mother but will naturally start the weaning process at around 4 weeks.

The mother will start to spend longer periods away from her litter but it is important for the kittens to remain with their siblings at this stage. During this period it is also important that the kittens have regular interactions with humans.

Increase the amount of daily handling which should continue to be gentle and should never frighten the kitten.

Regular handling should continue, getting them used to being touched all over. You can also include brief moments of restraint getting them used to veterinary handling. Allow more different people (men, women, adults, children) to handle the kittens but always in a way that is non-threatening and does not induce fear or avoidance in the kittens, so pick your people carefully! The aim is for kittens to learn that people are safe to be around and can be trusted.

Timetable

...Weeks 3-7 continued

Provide a variety of toys and enrichment as the kittens begin to play with their siblings and explore their environment. The kittens should also have a variety of textures to experience and include some normal household items and surfaces. If possible bring in some smells which a kitten would experience in the home. Have a cat carrier in the mix so the kittens get used to it being around before you start carrier training.

Introduce different types of scratching posts and encourage the kittens to play on them. They should have the option of upright ones and flat scratch mats.

Week 8 onwards

If the kittens are remaining with the rescue until they are neutered, they will need to continue with their socialisation and habituation programme.

SOCIALISATION CHART: 2-8 WEEKS

Week beginning: _____

Litter ID: _____

Age on admission: _____

Origin of litter: Home / Feral / Unknown

Week	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
GENTLE HANDLING							
Restained in hand							
Hold head							
Look in ears							
Examine neck area							
Stroke head neck, back and tail							
Touch paws and legs							
Lifted up and held							
Collar put on and removed							
Open mouth and examine							
Turn over and stroke belly							
Lift tail and look under							
Examine paws							
Kept apart from littermates for 2 minutes							
Placed into cat carrier							
Taken in cat carrier into car / van							
Groom with soft brush							
Gently restrained on table							
SURFACES TO WALK ON							
Shiny surface (e.g. glass)							
Tiles or lino surface							
Rough surface (e.g. stones)							
Carpet							

Week	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
MEETING PEOPLE							
Female handler 1							
Female handler 2							
Male handler							
Other Handler							
Elderly person handler							
Toddler (2-5 years)							
Older child (5-12 years)							
Teenager							
SOUNDS:							
Radio – music station							
Radio – ‘talk’ station							
Household sounds CD played							
Aerosol spray (at a distance)							
People shouting							
LITTER TRAY							
Clumping type litter							
Wood-chip type litter							
Soil, peat or sand							
Scented litter							
SCRATCHING POST							
Bark							
Cardboard							
String							

Week	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
FOOD TYPES							
Flavour 1							
Flavour 2							
Flavour 3							
Flavour 4							
SCENT IN CAGE							
Cloth smelling of dog							
Cloth smelling of cat (relaxed vaccinated cat)							
Cloth smelling of rabbit							
Cloth smelling of a baby							
TOYS							
Cardboard box							
Balls / cotton reels							
Empty plastic bottle							
Furry toy (e.g. ‘mouse’)							
Toy with bell							
ACTIVITIES							
Played with string / toy on string							
Recall for a food treat using kitten’s name							
OTHER PETS							
Contact with friendly, calm dog							
Visual contact with calm adult cat in cat carrier							