

KITTY-Kindergarten

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Introduction:

Classes for kittens are, in part, based on Guidelines created by the American Association of Feline Practitioners^{1, 38}. If puppies can attend kindergarten, why not kittens? Just as socializing dogs saves lives, the same turns out to be true for cats². For one thing, people are more likely to tote their cats to a vet's office if they're willing subjects. The classes are an effective method for kitties to be desensitized to their carriers, to strange people even to dogs. Getting out in the world is enriching! When it comes down to it, puppy classes are about teaching people - same is true here, and topics included are why de-claw is not necessary and litter box 101. What's more, you can train a cat to do things; the benefits of clicker training for cats are discussed.

Veterinary behaviorists endorse kitten socialization classes^{1,2,3,4}. These classes were created about a decade ago in Australia by veterinary behaviorist Dr. Kersti Seksel.

Cats visit the veterinarian less than half as often as dogs, yet there are 20 per cent more dogs than cats in America⁵.

- Fear of the carrier
- Fear of car ride
- Fear of strange places, smells, sounds

Also, people may feel cats are more independent, and therefore, somehow don't require medical attention⁶.

More cats are abandoned or relinquished to shelters than dogs; more cats are abused than dogs⁷. I believe even though there are more felines than canines – it's a good thing cats are have nine lives, they are somehow second-hand citizens.

There are just over 60 million dogs, and over 70 million owned pet cats in America, AVMA⁵. (90 million cats and 70 million dogs according to the American Pet Product Manufacturer's Association⁸).

It seems logical that if cats are acclimated to their carriers, to cars, and to the veterinary clinic – they are more likely to receive a more efficient exam, without a veterinarian doing a 'best guess' of blood work (for diabetes and kidney disease), detecting a heart murmur and getting a baseline for pulse and/or blood pressure. Fractious cats just can't possibly get the kind of thorough exam as calm cats asking to be petted.

For sure, what's most important – being positively predisposed to go to the vet office will get more cats into see veterinarians. The impact on their health is then undeniable. Ideally, all pets should visit their veterinarians twice annually for wellness exams.

Socialization Period of Cats¹:

4 weeks: Social play begins

5 weeks: Predatory behavior starts

6 weeks: Object and locomotory play starts

6-7 weeks: Adult like locomotion

9 to 14 weeks: Social play peaks

16 weeks: Object and locomotory play peaks/territoriality may begin

Socialization is not about play. Socialization is learning to tolerate members of one's own species as well as members of other species.

Value of Kitty Classes

Behavioral Enrichment. I'm glad that increasingly cats are indoors⁹. But we have a nation of brain dead fat cats.

At least 30 to 40 per cent of pets are overweight; 25 per cent obese – and even greater number in cats^{10,11,12}. These tubby tabbies likely have:

- Change in metabolism
- Significant health issues

Kitty Classes Save Lives!

- Cats must be vet checked before enrolling³⁸
- They are desensitized to the carrier
- Desensitized to travel
- Desensitized to strange people, species (canines)
- Learn about proper care – which may enhance health, such as clipping nails, brushing their coats and brushing teeth
- Prevent behavior problems, before they occur
- Understand what is normal cat behavior
- Subtle Signs of Illness^{6, 37}
- Feline Heartworm^{35, 36, 39}
- Provides a resource should problems occur later

To boost confidence, and just plain fun for kittens and for people^{1,2}.

Dispel Myths

Cats are not anti-social, albeit they are independent but social^{13, 14, 21}
Cats can be trained^{2,19, 20}. You train cats to enhance the animal/owner bond, not for the same practical reasons as you may a dog.

Curriculum

Week One Curriculum^{1,2,15}

- Introduction/Handouts
- Video on Cat Training from Steve Dale

- Keep cats indoors/environmental enrichment
- Pass the kitty
- Leash and harness – how cats can be safe outdoors
- Kitty play session
- Demo of nail clipping
- Brushing cat demo
- Clicker training explanation/demo
- Pass the kitty (at vet office in an exam room)
- Kitty play session
- Questions

Week Two Curriculum^{1,2,15}

- Clicker show 'n tell
- Bring out the dogs
- How to play with cats
- Kitty play session
- Introduction of dogs
- Litter box 101
- Pass the kitty
- Scratching posts talks and demo
- Tooth brushing demo
- Pilling demo
- Feeding the cats
- Pass the kitty
- Kitten play session (at vet office in exam room)
- Questions

Class Rules, General Class Information^{1,2}

- Kittens must be vet checked with a signed health certificate.
- Only kittens 8 to 14 weeks of age, according to Dr. Seksel. I take kittens up to 15 weeks.
- Do not feed kittens within a few hours before class
- Carrier desensitization handout is emailed or Faxed before attending first of two classes. (Handout is at www.stevedalepetworld.com)
- Purchase leash and harness
- Purchase toothbrush (for pets)

Health Certificate^{1, 2, 6 35, 36, 36, 37, 38, 39}

Is at www.stevedalepetworld.com

Instructor provides^{1,2}

- Litter boxes (ready to be trashed or dumped if used).
- Clickers
- Assorted toys

- Assorted scratching posts (handout on why not to declaw at www.stevedalepetworld.com)
- Feliway diffuser
- Indoor garden

Why we do we play pass the kitty:

To sensitize the kitties to handling by strangers, and therefore have them be more accepting on vet exams, and even by owners who should examine their pets at home. Cats, in particular, are subtle about presenting signs of illness⁶. Also, they will be acclimated to being handled by relative strangers, such as pet sitters or kids visiting your own children, for example.

Cats handled frequently at younger ages benefit physically, and also 'emotionally,' showing less fear and greater confidence and friendliness¹⁶.

Age appropriateness¹:

3 to 9 weeks, Human contact and handling very important, even necessary

Less than 12 weeks, handling and routine restraining

7 to 12 weeks social play

Over 14 weeks, learn to play fight

- We point out what is normal kitten behavior, and how cats signal/communicate^{17, 18, 21}.
- We point out how cats learn.^{20, 22, 23, 24}
- We encourage children in the class (under 8-years must have a second adult present)².
- Teach how to scratch in all the right places^{1, 21, 25, 26, 27, 28}
- "Think Twice Before you Declaw" download from www.stevedalepetworld.com²⁹.
- We teach 'Litter Box 101'^{1,30,31,32, 33, 34}
- Other topics include – but aren't limited to feline aggression, introducing a new cat, shy cats, etc.

Training Cats: Why Bother²⁰:

- Appropriate outlets for excess energy
- Better understanding, communication between humans and feline
- Exercise for the mind (as well as physical exercise)
- Learning begets learning – they learn to learn

If people better understand their kitties, and enhance their bond – perhaps they will be less likely to relinquish their cats if something does go wrong.

One quarter of pet owners with one or more cats statistically also have a dog^{5,8}. This is why we introduce cat friendly dogs into the class. Barking is actually a good thing so they are desensitized to the sound. However, too much – an overload of sound and/or handling (particularly if a kitty is already somewhat stressed) is not a good thing, and is too stressful².

Where Classes Are Held:

Advantages and disadvantages to holding classes in various locations, from veterinary offices (where they are exposed to that cold exam table, but finding enough kitties to participate from one practice may be impractical) to a dog wash to a bank.

Requirements for the location:

- Sanitary – cleaned if there were previous cats at the location, but the hope is that there were none.
- Closed door – so kitties don't run off
- Size appropriate, too large a space offers kitties too much freedom; too small may not allow for chairs for people to comfortably sit.

Marketing/Promotion of classes:

Without kitties, you have no class. Two or three minimum, with six to eight maximum. One veterinarian encourages clients by offering a rebate. You can work with a shelter, so when they adopt out kitties your class is mentioned. In return, any press attention is shared with that shelter. Print flyers. Send out press releases.

Enrollees must sign a waiver indicating their likeness may be used in the media.

References:

American Association of Feline Practitioners "Feline Behavior Guidelines"
www.aafponline.org

National Pet Wellness Month: www.npwm.com

Healthy Cats for Life: www.catwellness.org

American Heartworm Society: www.heartwormsociety.org

Detailed Curriculum, Class Rules, Sample Health Certificate, Legal Release for Media Coverage, List of Favored Additional Resources/References, sample fliers and press releases are all available at www.stevedalepetworld.com (click on Kitty-K tab).

Additional addendum of references at www.stevedalepetworld.com (click on Kitty-K tab)

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