

# What to do when kittens behave badly



Kittens are energetic and fun, but it is crucial that they get trained at a young age to interact properly



**ELAINE  
WEXLER-  
MITCHELL**  
FOR THE  
REGISTER

with humans. Frequently, I see owners with cuts and scratches all over their arms when they bring their kittens in for a veterinary visit. I also frequently handle pet kittens that scream and bite when they are held. Feline behavior is based on genetics, but also on a kitten's socialization during its first couple of months of life. You can train your kitten to be a more enjoyable pet if you recognize behavior problems at an early age and train your kitten before he trains you.

Orphan or hand-raised kittens are notorious for bad behavior, especially if they are not around other cats during their early development. The first way a kitten learns manners and proper behavior is through interaction with his mother and littermates. A queen will not allow a kitten to misbehave around her. She will scruff or rebuff the kitten so he calms or changes his actions. Littermates will

not allow overly aggressive play and biting. A human raising a single kitten can take care of the kitten's physical needs and love him but cannot train a kitten to temper his biting and scratching behavior the same way other cats can. Single orphan kittens tend to be very spoiled, and while they love their human "mothers," they often bite and fuss when they don't get their way.

"Normal" behaviors for a kitten would be to run and jump and attack things. Kittens have an innate hunting and stalking behavior, so it is important to make sure they have appropriate outlets when they want to engage. You should never play roughly with your hands or feet around a kitten. Kittens should never be allowed to bite any skin. Instead, get a stuffed sock or a stuffed toy to use as the "biting" or "attack" object. Use fishing pole toys and feather wands to direct a kitten's stalking and attacking behavior. You need to engage an active kitten in this type of play several times a day.

Social kittens like to be held and will allow you to roll them on their backs and pet their tummies. It is very important to hold kittens frequently and put them on their backs. Use calm praise and treats to rein-

force and train this behavior. You have to work harder with kittens that won't allow you to put them on their backs and relax. Don't give up on kittens that bite and scream when you work with them. If they get wild, give them a "kitty time out" in a dark bathroom or closet for a few minutes until they calm down.

Well-mannered kittens allow you to comb them and touch their individual toes. You should practice these behaviors and trim toenails every couple of weeks. It is also recommended for kittens to be held regularly by people other than their owners.

You and others should be able to hold and touch your kitten easily without him becoming fearful or aggressive. Always train with positive reinforcement. Use "time outs" or a squirt bottle filled with water to distract your kitten from behaviors you want to prevent. If your kitten misbehaves at home or during his first veterinary visit, discuss with your vet ways to in which to work with him. Early intervention is very important to changing behaviors in kittens.

Dr. Wexler-Mitchell is board certified in feline practice and owns The Cat Care Clinic in Orange. 714-282-2287 or [catcare.com](http://catcare.com).