

## Social Sweeties: Early, Positive Experiences

**Kittens benefit from positive socialization experiences in the early weeks of their lives.**

*Marty Becker, DVM, and Janice Willard, DVM*

An old adage states: As the twig is bent, so grows the tree, and nothing could be more true when looking at the role of experience and environment on the growing kitten brain. Scientific evidence shows that many mammals have sensitive periods when environmental experience largely impacts their mental and emotional development, and cats are no exception.

There is a lot of scientific evidence that early adverse experience can permanently affect the adult physiology, says Tony Buffington, DVM, professor at the Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine. Early socialization may prevent the effects of early adverse experience and also can help compensate for an adverse experience that may have occurred, Buffington says. In addition, isolating an animal from experiences may be potentially as damaging as adverse experience.

Much to Learn Unless you are rescuing kittens, [they] should stay with their mother for 12 weeks, says Pam Johnson-Bennett, author of *Think Like a Cat*. They learn through observation and experience. They learn litterbox behavior and food choices from observing their mother and they learn fair play and social behavior from their siblings.

The most sensitive socialization period for kittens is between 3 and 10 weeks of age. At this time, they need to learn from other kittens and their mother, but they also need to be around humans, so that we become part of their social circle.

Ideally, you should select your kitten, leave it with the litter until it is 12 weeks old, but visit and handle it during that socialization period. The next best scenario is to choose a kitten that was raised underfoot or in a household where it is handled regularly and exposed to a variety of circumstances.

The good breeders have always done this, Johnson-Bennett says.

The worst possible circumstance is a kitten that is both separated from its mother too soon and raised in the isolation of a barren cage.