

## Why Can't You Behave?

**Nature shapes your kitten's personality, but it's up to you to provide some nurture.**

*Charles Hand*

Deciding to add a kitten to your family is not unlike deciding to have a child. True, there are certain dissimilarities. A kitten is small and furry while most human babies arrive pretty close to hairless, and you're not going to find a lot of new babies scrunched down, waving their butts back and forth as they prepare to pounce. And you can choose a kitten from among a number of potential family members, while hospitals pretty much insist you go home with the baby you brought in. But there are a lot of similarities, too. Like a human child, a kitten comes with some genetic programming that makes it fluffy or straight-haired, gives it a tendency to meow or not, gives it a tendency to playfulness or reticence. But, as with a child, a kitten's environment has the power to modify its natural traits. On the other hand, by the time people pick a kitten from a litter, its socialization period is pretty close to over and the characteristics it brings to its new world have been pretty well fixed.

**Pick-a-Personality** A cat's personality is more or less apparent right from the start, say behavioral experts, so it is while you're making the selection that you should start its training by looking for the personality you want to predominate in your new kitten. Melissa Bain, DVM, a veterinary behaviorist at the University of California, Davis School of Veterinary Medicine, said both nature and nurture influence kitten and, eventually, adult cat behavior. However, nurture comes down to modifications of traits the kitten already has by the time a litter is ready for adoption. Major changes can be wrought, but only by major environmental modifications. "You can have a kitten born to a very friendly queen and tom and keep it in isolation, away from humans, and that cat is going to be more fearful of and less friendly toward people," Bain said. Even one incident in early kittenhood can bring such a change. "If it has had a few bad experiences during its primary socialization phase [3 to 7 weeks], such as someone accidentally stepping on its tail or dropping something loud next to it in close proximity to a person, that kitten can also develop an aversion to people."