

Bonding With a Sick Kitten

Long-term medical care seems to interfere with a kitten's ability to bond with her owner. A feline behavior expert offers some advice.

Pam Johnson-Bennett

Q: I rescued a 9-week-old kitten who has an upper respiratory infection and has been in isolation for over a month. I have to medicate the kitten everyday, and I fear it is getting in the way of our bonding. To complicate matters, my 7-month-old resident cat cries outside the isolation room door almost nonstop and has become more aggressive toward me. I know the situation is temporary but worry my resident cat will become more aggressive and I won't be able to ever get near the kitten. Any advice?

Feline behaviorist Pam Johnson-Bennett, author of *Think Like a Cat*, says: I'm so sorry you're going through this. That is so much for the precious little kitten to have to endure but because of your TLC and dedication, she will become healthy and get a good start in life. Even though the kitten will get beyond the trauma of being medicated so much, this is an important time for her socialization toward humans so continue to do your best to make the medicating a quick and casual experience. If you've been doing all of the medicating at once, perhaps try spacing it out a bit more or distract her by placing a drop of yogurt or cream cheese on her lip (if she likes that taste) when you are going to medicate her ears or eyes. One method that I have had used for years is clicker training for medicating. Teach the kitten to associate the clicker sound with food and then you can click whenever you medicate her and then offer the food reward. Clickers can be bought at pet supply stores or online. The clicker "marks" the behavior that you want from the cat and then you immediately offer a food reward (canned food works best). Start training the kitten by clicking and then offering a small amount of canned food on a spoon. This way she associates the two together. Then try doing a click as you medicate. If you live alone you'll have to be organized and have everything ready so you won't be fumbling for food or medicine. The key to making medicating less stressful is to be very quick and casual. Have it be over before the cat knows what happened. After medication, engage the kitten in a play session using a fishing pole toy so she is left with a positive memory of the experience. Do this whether you try the clicker method or not. As for your resident kitty, the behavior is normal. Try placing the Feliway Comfort Zone diffuser just outside the sanctuary door. Also, don't try to engage your resident cat in too much holding right now. When you see she is agitated or you suspect she may be getting agitated, distract her away from the door with a fishing pole toy and continue a low-key play session.