

Top Five Mistakes in Bringing Up Baby

Avoid these errors in raising your kitten and your pet will steer clear of future problems.

By Helen Jablonski

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Don't let your new kitten roughhouse with you. Provide her with toys to pounce on and chew. Are you thinking of adopting a kitten? If so, you'll want him to have a happy and trouble-free life in your home. To avoid behavioral problems down the road, don't make these common mistakes:

1. Letting kitty play rough

It's important that kittens stalk, chase, pounce and bite during play, but don't let the focus of their attacks be you. If your kitten starts to gnaw on your hand or bunny-kick your arm, put her down and ignore her. This will teach her that it's not OK to act aggressively toward you. Give your kitten toys that she can chase and wrestle or even a kitten playmate she can roughhouse with, but never let your kitten play rough with you.

2. Not teaching kitty where to scratch

Don't automatically assume an indoor cat must be declawed. If you give your kitten sturdy, appealing scratching posts and teach him to use them, he will not tear up your furniture. Put scratching posts in prominent places in your home, and keep kitty's sharp claws trimmed. Your veterinarian can teach you how to do this safely.

Adopting a kitten that is too young can lead to problems. A kitten should remain with his mother until he is 2 months old.

3. Using a cat-sized bathroom

It might be tempting to buy a nice big litterbox that you can use for years to come, but this is not good for your kitten. Kittens need short, low-sided litterboxes to accommodate their tiny bodies. Your kitten will certainly outgrow her junior-sized litterbox, but she must be able to get in and out easily while she's small. Keep your kitten's litterbox clean and stick with a litter she is comfortable with, and you're likely to steer clear of future litterbox problems.

4. Adopting a kitten too soon

Although a 6-week-old kitten is adorable, this baby is too young to be adopted. Kittens learn important social skills from their mother and littermates between 2 and 8 weeks of age. Their experiences during this developmental stage will also shape their future behavior, including how they relate to people, other animals and normal household events. If possible, visit and play with the kitten during this period so he bonds with you, but don't remove him from the nest until he's at least 2 months old.

5. Not brushing kitty's teeth

Experts say 80 percent of all cats will experience some type of dental disease, which can cause pain and changes in behavior. Start your kitten on a daily tooth brushing routine so she will have healthy teeth for life. Be sure to use toothpaste made for pets, which is safe for them to swallow, and have your veterinarian show you how to properly brush your kitten's teeth.

"The way to help the kitten be good is by providing the things that he needs to be good, like a good litterbox, a good scratching post and appropriate toys," says Suzanne Hetts, PhD, a Littleton, Colo.-based certified animal behaviorist.

A cat-friendly environment and loving guidance from you will help your new kitten become a healthy, well-behaved pet — and that's no mistake.

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