

FACTSHEET

Why kittens should stay with their mums until 8-10 weeks of age

Small kittens are cute and cuddly and it can be very easy for people to want to adopt very young kittens for this reason. However, there are a number of reasons why it is important for kittens to stay with their mother, and their litter mates, until they are 8-10 weeks old.

It is very important that if you find a kitten or litter of kittens who are without a mum, that you take them to a vet for a health check as soon as possible because mother cats often reject (abandon) their kittens if they have health issues. Some of these health issues are not obvious and can be internal. Neurological problems, growth development problems and serious illness can all be reasons why a mother cat will reject her kittens.

Health

A mother cat's milk is full of nutrients that are essential for a kitten to grow into a healthy cat. Antibodies are also present in the mother cat's milk that boost the kitten's immune system and help prevent disease. Kittens who are separated too early from their mother will not get enough of these nutrients and antibodies, which can cause immune system problems and make them more susceptible to disease. Growth problems can also occur that affect bone growth, organ development and neurological development. At about 3-4 weeks, the mother cat will teach her kittens to start eating solid food and start weaning them off her milk. Kittens started on solid food before their body is ready can suffer severe health issues that can lead to the death of the kitten.

Socialisation

The sensitive period for a kitten's social development is from 3-8 weeks. During this time they are learning to adapt to their surroundings, as well as getting accustomed to situations and outside influences that shape their personality. A mother cat will try to show her kittens a range of things during this time. Everything that a kitten comes into contact with from the outside world has a major impact on how the kitten will grow up. Eating, grooming, 'speaking cat' (body language and vocalisation), toileting, learning how to take care of themselves, and how to respond to humans and other animals, are all things learnt during this important socialisation period. In most cases, if the kitten is hand-raised by a person many of these cat behaviours are not taught to the kitten. It is very hard to teach a kitten to be a cat when we aren't cats ourselves. If you are caring for a mother cat and her babies, it is important to let them come into contact with a range of things and experiences to help them become well-adjusted cats.

Learning to play

Litter mates and mother cats teach kittens how to play. Nips and smacks between each other help to teach a kitten to play 'nicely'. Vocalisations that only a cat can teach are also displayed during play time. These vocalisations help the kitten communicate with other cats.

Play aggression is not usually seen in kittens who have grown up with their family unit. Unwanted toileting issues, scratching behaviours, play aggression, inter-cat aggression and health problems can, in most cases, be avoided if a kitten stays with their mother and siblings for 8-10 weeks. If you are caring for a mother cat and her babies, avoid separating kittens who seem to be playing rough as this is all part of the learning experience.

Abnormal behaviours

In many cases when kittens are removed from the mother cat too young, abnormal behaviours can develop. One of the most common of these is suckling behaviours. Most cat owners will tell you about their cat who likes a certain blanket or fabric and will lie on it kneading or sometimes sucking on it to get comfortable and go to sleep. If this only occurs for short amounts of time as the cat prepares to sleep, it is not a problem behaviour.

However, sometimes a kitten will show harmful self-suckling behaviours. This is when a kitten starts suckling on their own fur, or their litter mates, to find comfort. In some cases, this behaviour can be so severe that the kitten starts losing fur and any patch of fur they can reach is constantly wet. Nearly all of these cases occur due to the fact the kitten has been removed from the mother cat too early. The kitten is not trying to hurt themselves, or their litter mates, they are only trying to feel comforted so are reverting back to the suckling behaviour they would do with their mother. Never get angry at kittens who do this. It is important that you stop this obsessive behaviour before the kitten becomes an adult. The kitten needs to feel relaxed and happy so the best way to start curbing the behaviour is to provide the kitten with a soft toy as a friend. Place a heat pad in with the toy (there are specially designed cat toys that have a heat pad inside you can buy) and whenever you see the kitten suckling themselves, place the kitten on the toy. Ensure the heat pack is warm when you do this. You can also place a lavender pack in with the kitten as lavender has a calming effect on kittens. **Never use lavender oil** as this is toxic to cats; always ensure you are using a pack containing natural lavender (dried or fresh) as the lavender plant is not toxic. It is also important to try to distract the kitten from suckling themselves every time you notice the behaviour.

Calming behaviour medication may be needed to assist the kitten stop this behaviour, the use of calming treats, 'Zylkene' and 'Feliway' may be useful. In extreme cases its important you speak to your vet about the behaviour before it gets too severe.

Please see our factsheets on [Unwanted toileting hehaviour](#), [Unwanted furniture scratching](#) and [Feline aggression](#) for tips on curbing other behavioural issues.

Please call Cat Protection on 9519 7201 if you have any questions or would like any advice on caring for a mother cat and her kittens.

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