Cat Confidential:
The Book Your Cat Would Want You To Read

Vicky Halls

Chapter 1

The New Kitten

Annie's Story

annie was not the first cat i ever owned but she was the very first kitten. As with most things in my life I adopted an 'initiation by fire' approach to learning and decided that a well-adjusted domestic kitten from a loving home was just too easy. Surely it would be more challenging and beneficial to play surrogate mother as well? I was working with the RSPCA at the time when Annie came into my life. It was a shelter funded by the goodwill of the local people and it was always busy. I remember distinctly that a gentleman came in one morning clutching an old sweater containing a creature of some sort. We were quite used to everything from seagulls to snakes arriving in this way and usually took bets on the species the garment contained. In this particular instance it was a thousand fleas with a small ten-day-old black and white kitten attached to them. The poor mite was in danger of dying from anaemia from all the blood-sucking parasites to which it was playing host so my first job was to remove as many as possible and provide warmth and nourishment in the form of powdered kitten milk. Little Orphan Annie (Annie for short) had been found all alone in a field and the kind gentleman had driven some distance to bring her to us. My boss at the shelter, Rex, felt it would be good practice for me to hand-rear her. Looking back I can see how true it is that ignorance is bliss, but I really didn't fully appreciate the enormous responsibility of providing a tiny new cat with a good blueprint for life. After all, I was far too busy feeding her at one end and inducing the necessary bodily functions at the other with the aid of warm water, cotton wool and a degree of gentle persuasion. At the time we were sharing our home with an elderly male cat called Hoppy (you'll meet him later) who had agreed to take over the running of the household for the princely sum of a seat by the fire and a limitless supply of prawns. Hoppy became invaluable in the rearing of Annie as we discovered his extraordinary paternal instincts towards the tiny newcomer. He soon took over the toilet arrangements and bottom washing (that was definitely the last time I let him lick my face) and became a feline swing and activity centre for Annie as she grew. I can see him now, trying to look dignified with a small black and white kitten dangling from one ear like a piece of jewellery.

Hand-rearing kittens

Hand-rearing is never the ideal start for any kitten but sometimes it is essential for the survival of orphans or those whose mothers reject them. A better alternative would be to find a surrogate mother with a litter of a similar age since these females often accept other kittens and rear them as their own. In the absence of a feline

family the responsibility rests on the shoulders of humans to do a half-decent job. Rearing single kittens can often be a problem as they are automatically deprived of the ability to interact with siblings or other kittens of a similar age. Young cats also learn a great deal from their mothers. Cats are extremely effective observational learners, able to learn new behaviours by observing another cat's actions. I wonder what they learn by watching us? Single kittens can lack social skills in later life and find it difficult to interact with their own species. Annie often seemed to get it slightly wrong when she bumbled up to my other cats and got a cuff round the head for her trouble.

There is also a rather disturbing incidence of adult aggression in hand-reared cats. Research indicates that this could be down to the inability of humans to accurately mimic the behaviour of the feline mother during the weaning process. As a kitten starts to eat solids there are going to be occasions when he still returns to mum's milk bar for top-up feeds. These are allowed or rejected at the whim of the mother and this teaches the youngsters a very important lesson in life. Frustration! You don't always get what you want and you have to learn to deal with it without going into a complete temper tantrum. If the process hasn't quite gone according to plan when a human and a syringe play the role of mother then things can become problematical. Every time the adult cat doesn't get what it wants it cannot look up the rule book on 'how to deal with frustration' because it never learnt it as a kitten. The results can be painful and disappointing.

Apart from the practical demands of being a surrogate mother there are many other considerations. When you see the incredible amount of growing that a kitten packs into a few short weeks, both physically and behaviourally, it is hard to imagine a more demanding and significant role than 'mother'.

Early development

Just take some time to remind yourself how quickly a kitten develops.

From birth to two weeks

Kittens' responses are limited during the first two weeks of their life and their very existence is totally dependent on the mother. They respond to her warmth and her touch and there is a strong instinct to find a teat using scent. Kittens often form a preference for one particular teat, their acute sense of smell enabling them to do so. At this age the kittens are relatively immobile and they can only use a slow paddling movement to travel very short distances around their mother and within the nest area. For up to three weeks the kittens are totally dependent on the mother's milk for nutrition. All nursing is initiated entirely by the mother. During the first two weeks of life the eyes will usually open at some time between seven and ten days, although any time between two and sixteen days is normal. Teeth are also starting to erupt at about two weeks of age to prepare the youngsters for rather more challenging mealtimes.

From three to four weeks

During the third and fourth week the tiny kittens' vision starts to play a role in guiding them towards their mother, rather than relying on her warmth and smell alone. A rather staggering walk appears during the third week and by four weeks of age the kittens can move a reasonable distance away from the nest. Around this time they start to develop the body-orientating reaction that will enable them to right themselves in mid-air when they are falling (such a useful technique for all adventurous felines). Under free-living conditions, mothers start to bring live prey to their kittens from four weeks after birth onwards to enable the youngsters to experiment with the manipulation and consumption of prey. Four weeks is also the age at which kittens normally start to eat solid food (or at least walk through it and inhale it up their noses).

From five to six weeks

By the fifth week the kittens are all over the place, showing brief episodes of running, and by six weeks they have started to move like mini-adults. As the weaning progresses the kittens become increasingly responsible for initiating bouts of nursing, not all of them met with compliance from the mother. By this time voluntary elimination has developed, and kittens are no longer dependent on their mother to lick their perineum to stimulate urination. (This is the time when it's essential to get the litter training right.)

From seven to eight weeks

Kittens have begun to show adult-like responses to threatening social stimuli. They will run, freeze or show aggressive behaviour just like mother to scary sights, sounds and smells. Weaning is largely completed by seven weeks after birth.

From nine weeks onwards

Complex motor abilities, such as walking along and turning around on a narrow fence, still take time to develop and may not be fully effective until ten to eleven weeks after birth. Visual acuity continues to improve until twelve to sixteen weeks. Sexual maturity can occur from six months of age (occasionally even earlier) and social maturity (adulthood) at any time between eighteen months and four years of age. There you have it! The kitten is all grown up in the space of two short years.