

LITTER TRAINING YOUR KITTEN

In order to avoid litterbox problems in adult cats, it is extremely important that you get your kitten off to a good start. Fortunately, most kittens are attracted to an area where they can scratch, dig, and perhaps bury their urine and stool, so that dirt, clay, or any other substrate that allows for digging will usually be effective. Of course, if there are other appealing areas, such as plants with soil or a fireplace hearth, your kitten may be tempted to choose those areas instead. By choosing a suitable litter, placing it in an appropriate location for the kitten, keeping it clean and dry, and encouraging its use, most kittens can easily be housetrained. If you have more than one cat, add at least one litterbox for each new cat to ensure that there are enough clean litterboxes available at any one time, and to reduce the possibility of confrontation or conflicts at the litterbox.

To get your kitten off to a good start, it is a good idea to keep the pet within eyesight at all times or to confine it to a room with its litter when you cannot supervise. If your kitten stops playing and begins purposely sniffing around, there is a good chance that it needs to eliminate. Gently pick the kitten up, carry it to the litterbox, and place it inside. Praise any sniffing or scratching and give it loads of praise or a small food treat for eliminating. Do this for at least the first two weeks until it has established a regular pattern of using the box.

1. Litter (substrate)

- a) Choose an appropriate litter material. Studies have shown that more cats may prefer clumping litter and you may find it easier to keep clean. However, any other commercial litter material may prove to be equally or even more appealing to your particular kitten. Clumping litter may lead to tracking of material outside the box, and kittens that eat litter should not be given clumping litter.
- b) If the litter you have chosen is not being used by your kitten, try other types. Some kittens may prefer a different texture or type, while scented products may deter others. Traditional clay litter, recycled newspaper litter, a plastic litter pellet (pearls), cedar shavings, or even a little potting soil or sand added to the litter may prove to be more appealing.
- c) If your pet won't use the litterbox, try to determine if there is anything about the litter that is deterring your kitten. For example, you may find that scented litter, the texture of the litter, insufficient cleaning of the litter, or litterbox liners are leading to avoidance.

2. Litterbox

- a) Choose an appropriate litterbox. The box should be big enough that an adult cat can stretch and scratch. Some kittens prefer a litterbox with some privacy so that a hooded box may be preferable. Some kittens find the self-cleaning litterboxes highly appealing, while the product may frighten others.
- b) If the litterbox is not being used regularly by your kitten, try other types. A larger box may be more appealing, such as an underbed storage container or even a child swimming pool may be considered if you have multiple cats. Some kittens may prefer a deeper litterbox with more litter while others may prefer lower sides so that they can be more easily accessed. Some kittens may prefer a ledge on which to perch surrounding the litterbox.
- c) If your pet won't use the litterbox, try to determine if there is anything about the litterbox that is deterring your kitten. For example, you may find that a hood on the box, sides that are too high, a litterbox that is too small or cramped, or a motorized self-cleaning litterbox may lead to avoidance.

3. Location

- a) You may have a particular location where you prefer to locate the box, but this must also be acceptable for your kitten. The box should be easily accessible to the pet, especially when it wakes from a nap, or after eating or playing.
- b) If the litter is not being used regularly by your kitten, consider other locations. Is the litterbox located in an area that is inconvenient or hard to access? If you occasionally use the room for other functions (e.g., lavatory) it may be inaccessible to the kitten when it needs to be used.
- c) If your pet won't use the litterbox, try to determine if there is anything about the location that might be deterring the kitten. If the litterbox is in an area that might be unpleasant or anxiety-evoking for your kitten (e.g., a dark basement, next to a furnace or air vent, next to a washing machine, or near a toilet or bathtub), it may be necessary to relocate the litterbox. In addition, some kittens will avoid the area if they are chased, cornered, or bothered by another cat or dog in the home. If this is the case, then additional locations or more privacy may be needed (e.g., a cat door to a secluded area).

Spraying

Some cats, especially intact males that have reached puberty and females in estrus (heat), may begin to mark their territory by spraying urine on vertical objects and surfaces. Neutering will stop spraying in most but not all cats. If neutering alone is not successful you will need to seek advice to determine why your cat is continuing to spray. Treatment may involve finding and resolving the source of territorial stimulation, addressing anxiety or conflict in the home, eliminating urine odor, using a pheromone spray (Feliway™), and perhaps prescribing drugs.

What to do if your kitten does not use the litterbox

You will need to seek veterinary advice to help design a program to correct the problem. The first step is to determine whether your kitten is housesoiling with urine, stools or both, as well as the surfaces and locations that are being used. Medical problems that might cause these signs must then be considered, since painful elimination, more frequent elimination, or loss of control may drive the kitten away from its box. If the pet has no medical problems that are causing the housesoiling, a behavior program needs to be implemented.

Sometimes it can be successful if you remove the odor thoroughly from flooring and carpets with an odor counteractant, and change the function of the area to one where the kitten plays, eats, or uses a scratching post. Another option is to block access to the area that the kitten is soiling or to make the area unpleasant with a motion detector alarm or a sheet of upside-down vinyl carpet runner with the nubs pointing up. If there is more than one cat, additional litterboxes, or preventing the sharing of boxes (e.g., by cat doors or confinement) can be successful.

Often, the best indication of what can be done is determined by finding out where and when the kitten is eliminating. Try to determine what might be deterring the kitten from using its litter (see above) and what the kitten might prefer about the new area. It might be possible to move the litter or change the litter or box to better suit the kitten.