

Litter-training kittens

In order to prevent litterbox problems in adult cats, it is extremely important to 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 "litter" that allows for digging will usually be effective. However, if there are other surfaces that are attractive to your kitten such as plants with soil, you will need to prevent access to these areas. Most kittens can easily be housetrained if offered a suitable litter, in a quiet location with easy access. The box *should* be scooped and refilled each day or any time you see it has been used, and it should be changed at least once a week. Whenever you see your kitten using the box, be sure to provide rewards. To ensure that there are enough clean litterboxes available at any one time and to reduce the possibility of conflicts at the litterbox, provide at least one box per cat.

Begin by closely watching the kitten at all times or confine your cat to the room where the litter is located when you cannot supervise. Be sure the room has everything the kitten needs to keep it happy: places to climb, perch, rest, and scratch, and some food, water, and play toys. If you are supervising and your kitten begins purposely sniffing around, it may need to eliminate. Say "litter time," gently pick it up, carry it to the litterbox, and place it inside. Praise any sniffing or scratching and give praise, a small treat, or a play toy for eliminating. Do this for at least the first 2 weeks and a regular pattern of using the box is likely to be established. You may also find that in time the command "litter time" might get it to go to the box to eliminate to get the reward, without the need to move the kitten physically.

Litter (substrate)

1. Choose an appropriate litter material. Studies suggest that more cats prefer clumping litter. It's also easier to keep clean, although it may lead to tracking of material outside the box. Other commercial litter materials may prove equally or more appealing. Kittens that eat litter should not be given clumping litter.
2. If the litter you have chosen is not being used by your kitten, try other types. Some kittens may prefer a different texture. Traditional clay litter, recycled newspaper litter, plastic litter pellets (pearls), wheat litter, cedar shavings, or even a little potting soil or sand added to the litter may be more appealing.
3. If your kitten won't use the litterbox, try to determine if there is anything about the litter that it doesn't like. For example, you may find that the scent, texture, a litter liner, litter additive, or insufficient cleaning is leading to avoidance.

Litterbox

1. Choose an appropriate litterbox. The box should be big enough that an adult cat can move about and scratch. Many litterboxes are too small for a cat to enter comfortably, squat, and dig. Some kittens even prefer self-cleaning litters while others are frightened by these products.
2. If the litterbox is not being used regularly, try other types. Some kittens prefer the privacy of a hooded box. A larger box may be more appealing, such as a sweater storage box or even a small child's swimming pool if you have multiple cats. Some kittens may prefer a deeper box 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.
3. If your pet won't use the litterbox, try to determine if there is anything about it that is deterring your kitten. For example, you may find that a hood, sides that are too high, a litterbox that is too small, or a motorized self-cleaning litterbox may lead to avoidance.

Location

1. The box should be located in a quiet area that is easily accessible to the pet, especially when it wakes from a nap, or after eating or playing.
2. If the box is not being used by your kitten, consider sites that are easier to access including the ones that the kitten prefers to use. If you use the room for other functions (e.g., bathroom), it may be inaccessible to the kitten when it needs to be used.
3. If the litterbox is in an area that might be unpleasant or anxiety-evoking for your kitten (e.g., a dark basement, or next to a furnace, air vent, washing machine, or toilet) it may be necessary to relocate it.
4. Some kittens will avoid the area if they are chased, cornered, or bothered by another cat or dog in the area. If this is the case, then additional locations or more privacy may be needed (e.g., a cat door to the area).

Spraying

Some cats, especially males that reach puberty and have not been neutered and female cats in estrus (heat), may begin to mark their territory by backing up and spraying a stream of urine on vertical (upright) objects and surfaces. Neutering will stop the spraying behavior in most cats. If neutering 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, reducing urine odor, or using a pheromone (Feliway) or medication.

What to do if your kitten does not use the litterbox

1. Determine whether your kitten is soiling with urine, stools, or both and identify the surfaces and locations that are soiled. Discuss the problem with your veterinarian since medical causes must first be considered.
2. Next, determine where and when the kitten is eliminating to try to determine why it might be avoiding its litter and what the kitten might prefer about the area where it soils. It might then be possible to move the litter or change the litter or box to suit the kitten best.
3. Remove the odor thoroughly from flooring and carpets with an enzymatic/bacterial cleaner.
4. Change the function of the area by placing food bowls, toys, or a scratching post in the area.
5. Consider blocking access to any area where the kitten is soiling or make the area unpleasant with a motion-activated alarm or spray or with an uncomfortable surface such as double-sided tape or a sheet of vinyl carpet runner with the nubs pointing up.
6. If there is more than one cat, provide more litterboxes and at least two litter stations.