

Kitty Kindy

K. Seksel

*Seaforth Veterinary Hospital, 55 Ethel Street
Seaforth, NSW 2092, Australia*

The importance of socialisation and training has long been recognised in dogs. Puppy Parties and Puppy Preschool classes are now an accepted medium through which to educate not only the dog, but also its owner, on acceptable social behaviour. Many veterinary practices and dog training clubs now offer advice on training and responsible pet ownership to the novice and experienced dog owner. Around 50% of households in Western societies now own pets and as the health benefits of pet ownership, such as lower blood pressure and serum triglycerides, become more widely known perhaps, this figure will increase.

In many countries, as lifestyles and society's attitudes change, cats are becoming increasingly more popular as pets. So as more and more people turn to cats as pets, it is also important to educate the cats, as well as their owners, about acceptable behaviours. Cat owners need to know that cats are not "no maintenance" pets and they too, have responsibilities as a pet owner. Many Governments in Australia are introducing legislation to control cats. These measures include compulsory microchipping and desexing as well as the introduction of cat curfews from dusk to dawn. Some of these measures will require that cat owners become more aware of their cat's behaviour and how to control it. These owners need advice on as many topics on which we now educate dog owners.

Cats, like dogs, require socialisation with members of their own species as well as with people and dogs if they are to become social members of human households. It is well known that early handling of kittens influences their development. Kittens, like puppies, can benefit from such early handling and training classes. Cat owners need to be informed about normal cat behaviour and the earlier this starts the better, so Kitten Kindergarten is an ideal option. Millions of cats worldwide are euthanased each year because of unrealistic expectations or behaviour problems. Education of the owners is an important facet of a veterinarians job. Kitty Kindies were created as a place where owners could come and learn about their kittens. The kittens learn how to interact and play with other kittens, and thus learn important social skills. The classes were also designed to teach owners how to interact and play with their kittens. For the past 18 months Seaforth Veterinary Hospital has been running Kitty Kindy classes as well as Puppy Preschools. The kitten classes were initiated through a demand from the clients. They wanted more knowledge about their cats and their behaviour. They also wanted to train their cats. It is often said that cats cannot be trained, they are too aloof, too independent but cat owners already know that the sound of a tin or bag of cat food being opened promptly brings the cat to their side. Hence these cats have already been taught to come.

Cats are not small dogs so the methods used to train and socialise dogs can not be directly transferred. The socialisation period of kittens appears to end earlier so that kittens older than 14 weeks may actually learn to fight instead of play, unless the classes are carefully controlled. At Seaforth Veterinary Hospital the Kitty Kindy classes are run for one hour each week for two weeks. The classes aim to increase the knowledge of owners about cats, to have better behaved adult cats, prevent behaviour problems as well as to build a strong bond between the veterinary hospital and the owner. Kitten Kindies allow the kittens to explore, learn to play with toys and develop confidence in new surroundings. The classes also teach the

owners about normal cat behaviours and how to modify socially unacceptable ones. The whole family is encouraged to attend. Classes are limited to 3-6 kittens and the kittens must have had their first vaccination against Feline Enteritis and Feline Rhinotracheitis and Calicivirus prior to attending. Owners of older cats are also encouraged to attend, although their cats do not participate in the socialisation classes.

The first class deals with normal cat behaviour. The kittens are allowed to explore the room and toys at their own pace. They are never forced to interact. As with puppy classes there is always a shy kitten that does not want to socialise or play initially. Owners are encouraged to ask questions. Potential problems, ranging from litter training to scratching furniture, are covered. Suggestions are offered on how to prevent them from occurring as well as how to correct them. Topics such as introducing the new cat to the household, provision and placement of litter trays and the importance of establishing routines are discussed.

Owners are taught to play appropriate games with their kittens. More and more often now cats are being kept totally indoors to prevent disease and misadventure, so that environmental enrichment techniques for apartment cats are also discussed. Bathing, grooming, worming, vaccinations, diet and other aspects of health care are covered. Owners are shown how to administer tablets, how to hold and handle the cat for bathing or nail clipping and general grooming. They are taught about the importance of dental hygiene and how to check and clean teeth. The kittens are also taught to come in response to the command and their name. The owners are shown how to train their kitten, or cat to come by using positive reinforcement and operant conditioning. The principles of reward and reprimands are explained to owners. The use of appropriate rewards and reprimands are discussed, as well as the importance of their timing and frequency. Food or a game is the most successful reinforcement for most kittens. Food rewards consist of tiny pieces of bar-b-q chicken or Vegemite™ as this appeals to most cats. In class two the kittens are again encouraged to interact with each other and a variety of toys are provided. Any problems or questions are dealt with as they arise during the class. The importance of regular handling of the kittens is again discussed. The owners are encouraged to pick up and groom the other kittens in the class. During this class the kittens are trained to sit and “give me five” as well as to walk on a harness or collar and lead should the owners want. To train the kitten to sit a tiny, tasty morsel is held just above the kitten’s nose and slowly moved backwards. As the kitten’s eyes follow the food, its hindquarters are lowered to the ground and the kitten sits. Food is given immediately. Sometimes, it helps to let the kitten chew on the food at the same time, only releasing the titbit as the kitten sits. The word “sit” is paired with the action only after several successful repetitions without the command have been completed. As kitten’s naturally raise their paws in response to the food this action can be used to train the kitten to “Give me Five” or “Give me Ten” or shake paws. Walking on a collar and leash or a harness can also be useful for indoor cats whose owners wish to take them outside without the risk of losing them. Initially the kitten should be allowed to get used to a collar, then allowed to drag a light leash around. The kitten can then be encouraged to follow the owner with food while the owner holds the leash. Some cats will not walk on a harness initially so they have to become slowly accustomed to it. Training kittens requires more patience than training puppies. They are often reluctant to eat or interact until they are familiar with their surroundings so that more time has to be allowed for this. The owners are encouraged to practise at home where there are fewer distractions. The younger the kitten, the easier it appears to train. Where puppy training classes can often be very noisy, Kitty Kindy classes are usually a lot quieter. There tends to be a lot more discussion of problems or potential problems so that the trainers need to be well informed and well prepared.

The provision of litter trays, an example of an indoor garden, scratching post and toys in the room are important. There should also be somewhere for the kittens to hide, for example, a cardboard box. The classes benefit not only the kittens and their owners but also the veterinary practice. The kittens tend to be more manageable as adults and the owners are better informed. It may also help decrease the numbers of animals euthanased for behaviour problems each year by educating the owners, as well as the cats. It is yet another important service that veterinarians and their staff can offer the pet and non pet owning public.

References

- Anderson, W., Reid, P., Jennings, G. L. (1992) Pet ownership and risk factors for cardiovascular disease. *Medical Journal of Australia*. 157: 298-301
- Anderson, W. P. (1996) Medicine and the Community, the benefits of pet ownership. *Medical Journal of Australia* 164: 441-442
- Friedmann, E. (1990) The value of pets for health and recovery. In Burger, I. H. (ed): *Pets, benefits and practice*. Waltham Symposium 20, Harrogate, BVA Publications
- Landsberg, G. (1991) Behaviour problems in pets: a growing veterinary concern. *Veterinary Medicine*, 10: 988
- Martin, P. Bateson, P (1988) Behavioural development in the cat. In Turner, D. C., Bateson, P. (ed): *The Domestic Cat, the biology of its behaviour*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- McCune, S., McPherson, J. A., Bradshaw, J. W. S. (1995) Avoiding Problems: the importance of socialisation. In Robinson, I. (ed): *The Waltham Book of Human-Animal Interaction: Benefits and Responsibilities of Pet Ownership*. Pergamon Press, UK.
- McHarg, M., Baldock, C., Heady, B. W. et al (1995) *National Pets and People Survey*. Urban Animal Management Coalition, Sydney.
- McFarland, D. (1985) *Animal Behaviour -Psychobiology, Ethology and Evolution*. Longman Scientific and Technical. Harlow, England.
- Robinson, I. (1992) Behavioural Development of the Cat, In Thorne, C. (ed) *The Waltham Book of Dog and Cat Behaviour*. Pergamon Press, Oxford.
- Seksel, K. (1996) *Your new kitten, a bundle of fun*. Australian Small Animal Veterinary Association, Bondi, NSW.
- Seksel, K. (1997): *Kitten Kindy (Video)*. Malcolm Hunt Productions, Crows Nest, Australia.