

# Weaning Kittens



## Introduction

Weaning a kitten seems simple. When the kitten is old enough to eat solid food the mother cat, or the fosterer, simply stops giving them milk. But there's more to weaning a kitten, than just taking away milk. What happens at the time of weaning may affect a kitten's social skills, physical and emotional development.

### How Mother Cats Wean Their Kittens

For kittens that live with their mother, weaning is a gradual process. For the first three weeks of their life all kittens want, and all they get, is their mother's milk. She spends most of her time suckling her kittens in the nest. By about day 27, this begins to change. The mother cat spends more time outside the nest and if there is solid food available the kittens will begin to eat a little of it. If they are born in to the wild, the mother will start bringing

back prey for them to eat.

Over the next three weeks the mother spends less time allowing the kittens to suckle and begins blocking their access by sitting on her belly so that they cannot reach the nipples or by simply remaining out of reach. The kittens often make vigorous attempts to reach the nipple. This is probably their first experience of frustration.

Blocking the kittens' access increases as the kittens get older. Some cat

mothers may push their kittens away, even hissing or cuffing them. In the same period the kittens spend less time suckling and slowly the proportion of solid food in their diet increases as they learn it is an alternative way to satisfy their hunger. By the beginning of the eighth week many kittens will be fully weaned.

### Lessons The Kittens Learn

So what do the kittens learn from the weaning process? Animals learn by rewards. If a certain action is rewarded

(positive reinforcement is the scientific word), the animal is more likely repeat it. And if the action is not rewarded (or if it is punished) the animal is less likely to repeat the behaviour.

After three weeks of unlimited access to milk, the kittens experience the frustration of having their access blocked. Being unable to satisfy their hunger is a form of punishment. This encourages them to seek other sources of food. When they start eating the dead prey (or solid food) they are rewarded by the cessation of their hunger. They learn not only that the prey is good to eat, but that if they practice their hunting skills, they will be rewarded by a delicious mouse.

Milk becomes harder to access so frustrating and less rewarding: solid food (prey) becomes more rewarding. So the result is they eat more solid food (or prey) and suckle less.

Simultaneously, they have learned to tolerate frustration. We think – though it has not yet been proved – that being weaned may be a process which will help kittens to tolerate frustration in later life.

### More to Mothering Than Milk\*

We need to remember that kittens get more than milk from their mother. They get important mothering by body contact when they sleep with her, are washed by her, or are helped to eliminate by her. This tactile mothering has been shown to be very important in helping both humans and animals to grow up normally. It is essential for their future emotional and physical wellbeing. Fosterers need to supply not just milk but also mothering contact.

### How we Should Wean Our Bottle-fed Kittens.

- Bottle feeding should always be a last resort. Kittens will thrive better if they can be suckled by a foster cat mother. Lactating cats will often accept an extra kitten either amongst an existing litter (if the orphan is the same age) or after her kittens have stopped suckling.
- Kittens that are bottle fed should, if possible, be kept with their mother

even if she is unable to suckle them. They need the tactile mothering they can get from her, not just the milk.

- If that is not possible, they should be kept with siblings so that they can get some of the body contact they require.
- Occasionally a friendly adult cat, even a neutered male, will “mother” a kitten. With careful supervision of the introduction, this may be a possibility.
- If none of this is possible, then orphaned kittens should be given a warm nest with a soft toy, to simulate the body contact they crave and need. This is very much the last option. Body contact with a human fosterer is also important. If you can carry the kitten with you around the house, this will supply some tactile mothering.
- Just letting the kitten to wean itself when it wants to may not be the right way to help a kitten grow up into a balanced cat. It does not learn the lesson that frustration is part of life.
- Take responsibility for weaning. After about four weeks, human fosterers should very gradually and gently begin to withdraw easy access to the bottle. This can be done by reducing the milk available by occasionally taking the bottle away before the kitten has drunk its fill. Appropriate solid food must, of course, always be available.
- A word of caution. How and when this human weaning of a kitten is done will depend on the condition of the kitten. Poorly kittens should not be weaned too soon or too abruptly. They may need extra time with both bottle milk and solid food available.

**Reference:** Seitz, P. F. D., (1959), ‘Infantile Experience and Adult Behavior in Animal Subjects: II. Age of Separation from the Mother and Adult Behavior in the Cat,’ *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 21, 378