

# Cat Socialisation

## Cats socialising with humans

Domestic cats have adapted to become a social species and require companionship just as much as safety, food, and water for their physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. Evidence indicates that cats form the same types of emotional attachments to people as do puppies and human infants<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>Vitale et al., 2019, Current Biology, 29, R859-R865

## Socialisation with people

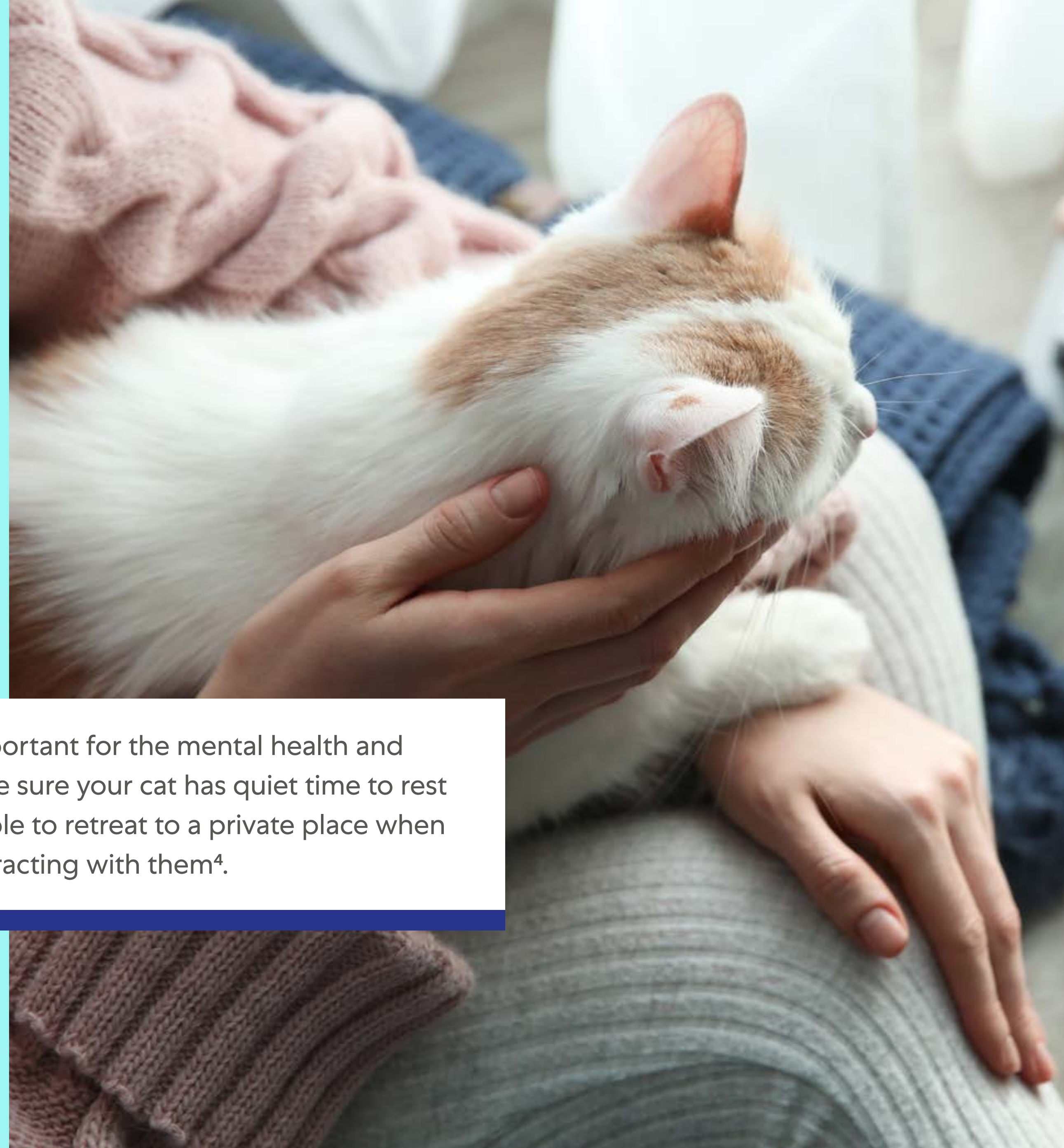
A recent study showed that most cats preferred human interactions to food, toys, and scent<sup>2</sup>. Considering that food is necessary for survival, it highlights how important human companionship can be for cats. The required frequency and intensity of interaction with people will also vary depending on your cat's unique preferences and personality, as well as their lifestyle (see [Individuality](#)). For example, a cat who lives outdoors will usually require more dedicated interaction time with their owners than a cat that lives indoors and is with their family a lot<sup>3</sup>.

Though social interaction with humans is clearly vitally important for the mental health and emotional wellbeing of every cat, it's just as important to make sure your cat has quiet time to rest and avoid conflict. Providing your cat with the choice to be able to retreat to a private place when needed is just as important as regularly interacting with them<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>2</sup>Vitale Shreve, KR, Mehrkam, LR, & Udell, MAR, 2017, Social interaction, food, scent, or toys? A formal assessment of domestic pet and shelter cat (*Felis silvestris catus*) preferences, *Behav Process*, Vol 141(3), pp322-328

<sup>3</sup>Sandøe, P, Nørspang, A, Forkman, B, Bjørnvad, C, Kondrup, S, & Lund, T. (2017). The burden of domestication: A representative study of welfare in privately-owned cats in Denmark. *Animal Welfare*, 26(1), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.7120/09627286.26.1.001>

<sup>4</sup>Ellis, S, Kitten Socialization, Available at: <https://icatcare.org/app/uploads/2020/02/kitten-socialization.pdf>, Accessed: 10 January 2022





**Exposure to many positive social interactions will help your cat to cope better with new (and potentially stressful) social situations, like visitors or pet-sitters<sup>5</sup>**

## Variety is key

When it comes to socialisation with people, positive and regular interactions with owners or caregivers have the most significant impact on a cat's mental health and wellbeing. Some cats will even develop separation anxiety when their bonded family are absent<sup>6,7</sup> and may go through a prolonged period of grief after the loss of a human companion<sup>8</sup>. But this doesn't mean that cats shouldn't interact with a wide variety of people throughout their lifetime. Consider socialising your cat with all different sorts of people, including those of varying:

- **Physical appearance** – height, build, skin colour
- **Gender**
- **Age** – adults, children, the elderly
- **Clothing styles** – hoods, caps, hi-viz jackets, face masks, helmets
- **Voices** – deep, high-pitched, loud, soft
- **Body language and movement** – fast, jerky, energetic, calm, slow
- **Physical abilities** including those who use walking sticks, wheelchairs and other accessories and devices

<sup>5</sup>Ellis, S, Kitten Socialization, Available at: <https://icatcare.org/app/uploads/2020/02/kitten-socialization.pdf>, Accessed: 10 January 2022

<sup>6</sup>De Souza Machado, D, Oliveira, PMB, Machado, JC, et al., 2020, Identification of separation-related problems in domestic cats: A questionnaire survey, Plos ONE, Vol 15(4) DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0230999, Accessed 07 February 2022

<sup>7</sup>Eriksson, M, Keeling, LJ, & Rehn, T, 2017, Cats and owners interact more with each other after a longer duration of separation, Plos ONE, Vol 12(10), DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0185599, Accessed 07 February 2022

<sup>8</sup>Buzhardt, L, Do Cats Mourn? Available at: <https://vcahospitals.com/know-your-pet/do-cats-mourn>, Accessed 07 February 2022

## Tips for quality time

Spending quality time together and sharing positive socialisation experiences helps to strengthen the bond with your cat, and can enhance physical, mental and emotional wellbeing for both of you.

Here are some ways you can help support building positive relationships between you, your cat and other people they interact with<sup>9</sup>:

- **Let your cat choose.** Forcing interactions with your cat can be stressful, so let them decide when and if they want to interact with you (see [Individuality](#)). If your cat walks away from you when you're petting them, you should assume they've had enough and leave them be. Allow them to have choice and control, enabling agency in their life
- **Provide routine.** Setting up a regular scheduled playtime (even if it's just a few minutes a day) will help build positive interactions with your cat, rather than longer, more sporadic play sessions
- **Physical contact.** While many cats enjoy being petted or groomed by their owners, others don't thrive on this type of contact. Cats also tend to have strong individual preferences about which body parts they will allow to be stroked or touched (see [Individuality](#)). For instance, many cats like to be petted under the chin and dislike being petted on the belly.



<sup>9</sup>Casey, RA, & Bradshaw, JWS, 2008, The effects of additional socialization for kittens in a rescue centre on their behaviour and suitability as a pet, Applied Animal Behaviour, Vol 114(1-2), pp. 196-205



- **Treats and rewards.** Rewarding your cat can help reinforce positive behaviours and is a way of showing affection. Rewards can even be used to train new behaviours and provide environmental enrichment (e.g. puzzle feeding toys), which can be both mentally and emotionally stimulating for cats
- **Scent marking.** Cats will typically rub themselves against individuals that they share a close bond with. By doing this they are using chemical signals to mark you as a friend, so make sure to let them engage in this important natural behaviour
- **Handle with care.** Kittens that experience rough play and handling, particularly during the sensitive period, may be more likely to show aggression towards humans in later life.<sup>10</sup> Be sure to avoid using punishment to modify your cat's behaviour, relying on positive reinforcement-based training techniques instead, such as, providing treats, praise, and games when your cat demonstrates a desirable behaviour
- **Varied and ongoing social meetings.** Positive and varied social experiences such as taking your cat to kitten classes at your local vet, letting them explore different environments (home, backyard or harness walks if they are comfortable), travelling in the car or having visitors over helps to ensure they continue to feel confident in lots of different places and with a range of people. Though this can be an excellent source of mental stimulation, you must always be guided by what your cat is comfortable with

## Interactions with children

Irrespective of whether there are children in your household, your cat may still encounter children over the course of their lifetime, for example, if you have visitors or rely on another family to pet-sit.

Positive socialisation with children of all ages should therefore be considered. This is critical to help reduce anxiety over interacting with children, and improve your cat's emotional wellbeing long-term, as well as ensuring that children are kept safe around your cat.

Children naturally behave differently from adults and may make rapid, unpredictable movements or high-pitched vocalisations like squealing. This can be frightening for cats, as well as a source of stress that may lead to medical and/or behaviour issues that negatively impact their emotional wellbeing (see [Health](#), and [Environment](#)). Cats that are calm, confident and behave appropriately when interacting with children are also unlikely to be neglected or re-homed due to incompatibility with a family's lifestyle.





## Supervision and boundaries

It's important that cats and children are always closely supervised and that cats receive early and ongoing positive socialisation experiences with children to help establish a bond based on mutual trust and understanding. It's also important to recognise when your cat is feeling threatened or anxious (see [Introduction](#)) to help prevent both emotional trauma and injury to all parties.

Remember as well that your cat will have unique preferences when it comes to social interactions and it's important to respect their unique needs (see [Individuality](#)). For example, some cats may never enjoy being picked up, stroked, or interacting closely with children and it's important to respect these boundaries.



## Top tips for improving relationships between children and cats:

- **Learn your cat's body language.** Do not force your cat to approach or interact with children if they are anxious or afraid. Allow them the option to retreat from the situation to a safe space at all times or ask the child to move away if your cat needs space
- **Let your cat approach.** Teach children to let the cat come to them, rather than running up to them for a pat. They should also learn to ask for a parent or guardian's permission before interacting with a cat, and if possible, under close supervision of an adult (babies and toddlers should never be left unsupervised with a cat)
- **Education.** Children should also be taught how to carefully handle a cat or kitten and to avoid picking them up, yelling, loud noises, or sudden movements. As children mature, teach them to recognise body language that denotes fear, stress, or aggression so they may avoid interacting with these cats
- **Respect your cat's boundaries.** If your cat wants to avoid being around a child, respect this and do not force interactions







- **Provide refuge.** Make sure that your cat has a safe place to escape the chaos that comes with living with small children or having them visit
- **Establish ground rules.** Children should be taught to leave cats alone when they are eating, sleeping, toileting, or resting in their own bed, or shelter
- **Reward positive interaction.** Offer treats and preferred petting - e.g., chin, cheeks, etc. to your cat when interacting with children to help make the association pleasant and reward calm behaviour
- **Know your cat.** Understand that some cats might never be able to be at ease with children or enjoy being around them
- **Introduce when they're ready.** Separate and/or supervise cats and children until the children are old enough to be empathetic and interact appropriately with them

Learn more about socialisation and emotional wellbeing for your pets at [shine.waltham.com](https://www.shine.waltham.com)