

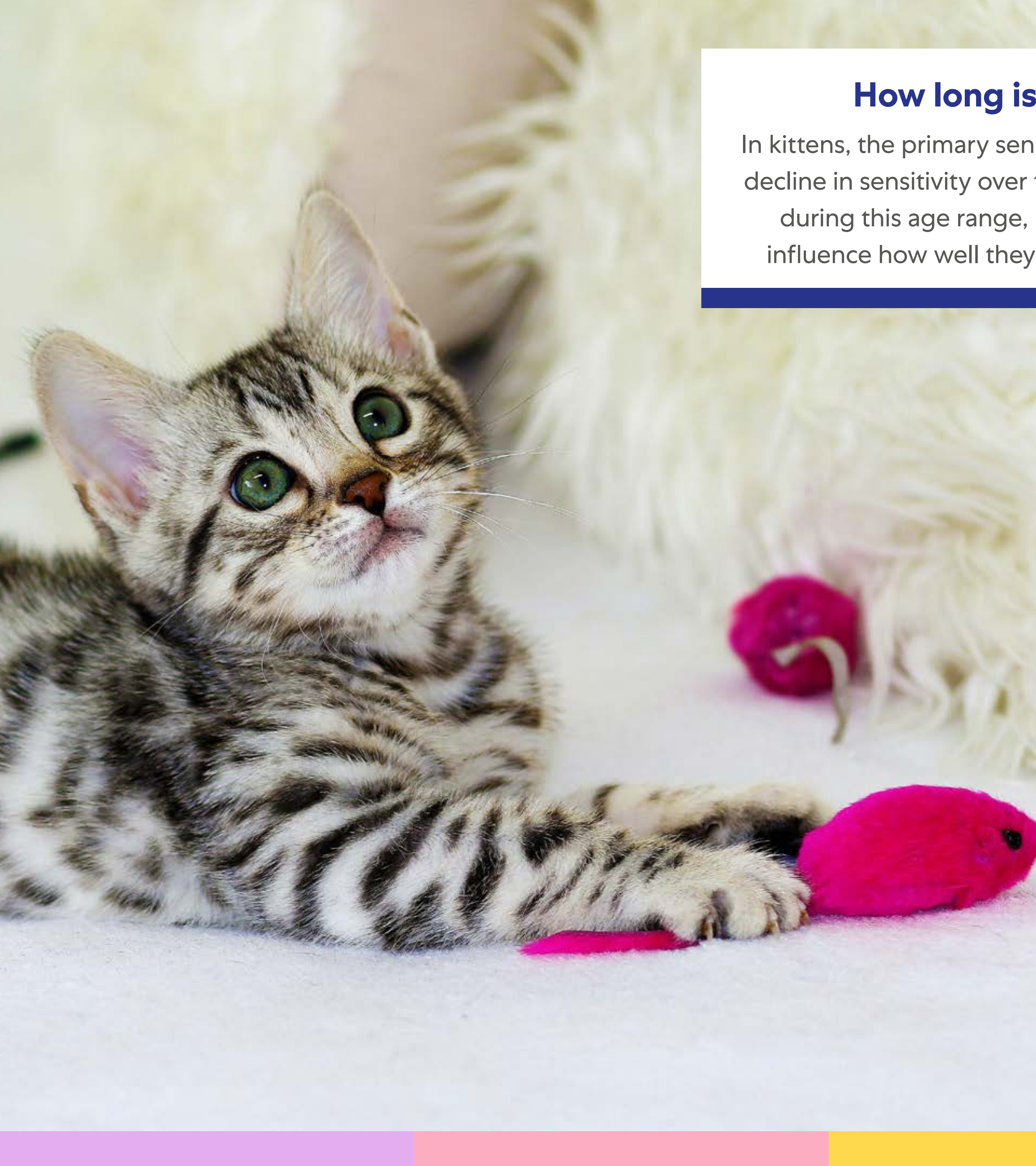
Cat Socialisation

The importance of the sensitive period

The first few months of life are particularly important for socialisation. There is a distinct phase that represents a 'sensitive period' during which time kittens are best suited to learn to enjoy the company of people, other animals and learn about new experiences. You might also have heard of this referred to as the 'socialisation window'.¹



¹McCune, S, Kruger, KA, et al., 1995, Avoiding problems: The importance of socialisation. In: The WALTHAM® Book of Human-Animal Interaction: Benefits and Responsibilities of Pet Ownership., 1st Edition, Robinson; Leicester, pp: 71-86



How long is the sensitive period or socialisation window?

In kittens, the primary sensitive period occurs between two and seven weeks of age, with a gradual decline in sensitivity over the following weeks.² The quantity and quality of socialisation that occurs during this age range, in particular, is likely to have long-term effects on adult behaviour and influence how well they interact with others and cope with new experiences (see [Individuality](#)).

Providing positive socialisation experiences during this significant developmental window plays an important role in your cat's future emotional wellbeing, by setting them up to be a well-adjusted adult. For example, when kittens of feral mothers are exposed to people during this time, they usually become acclimatised to regular human contact and make good pets. Conversely, kittens who are not positively exposed to people before three to four months of age will most likely be afraid of people, especially strangers throughout their life.³

This means that providing positive socialisation experiences should begin as early as possible with the breeder, previous owner, rescue group or shelter. In fact, studies have proven that kittens who are handled for just fifteen minutes a day from birth are more social, willing to explore, and able to handle stress as they develop.⁴ They are also likely to be more social with people when placed in a new home after weaning.⁵

²Cromwell-Davis, SL, 2007, Cat Behaviour: Social Organization, Communication And Development, The Welfare Of Cats, Vol 3, pp. 1-22

³McCune, S, 1995, The impact of paternity and early socialization on the development of cats' behaviour to people and novel objects, Applied Animal Behaviour Science, Vol 45, pp. 109-124

⁴Karsh, EB, Anderson RK, Hart, BL, et al., 1984, The pet connection: its influence on our health and quality of life, 1st Edition, University of Minnesota Press, pp. 207-215

⁵Casey, 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

Importance of maternal care and littermates for socialisation

Kittens who receive high levels of maternal care tend to experience a reduction in aggression and anxiety⁶ and learn vital behaviours from their mother, such as how to hunt and use a litter tray. Though cats are typically weaned before eight or nine weeks, keeping the litter together for fourteen weeks is often suggested to promote social and mental development⁷. These key socialisation experiences with their littermates, other cats in their colony and people, will have a huge impact on the kittens' future behaviour and can help prevent problems in later life (see [Individuality](#), and [Health](#)).

Though a kitten's primary sensitive period finishes around seven weeks of age, it doesn't mean that socialisation should stop there. Ongoing socialisation to a wide variety of people, objects and environments should continue throughout your cat's lifetime, as long as it doesn't cause distress.

To improve social behaviours, kittens should ideally be raised with their mother and littermates, and then exposed to other cats with good social skills



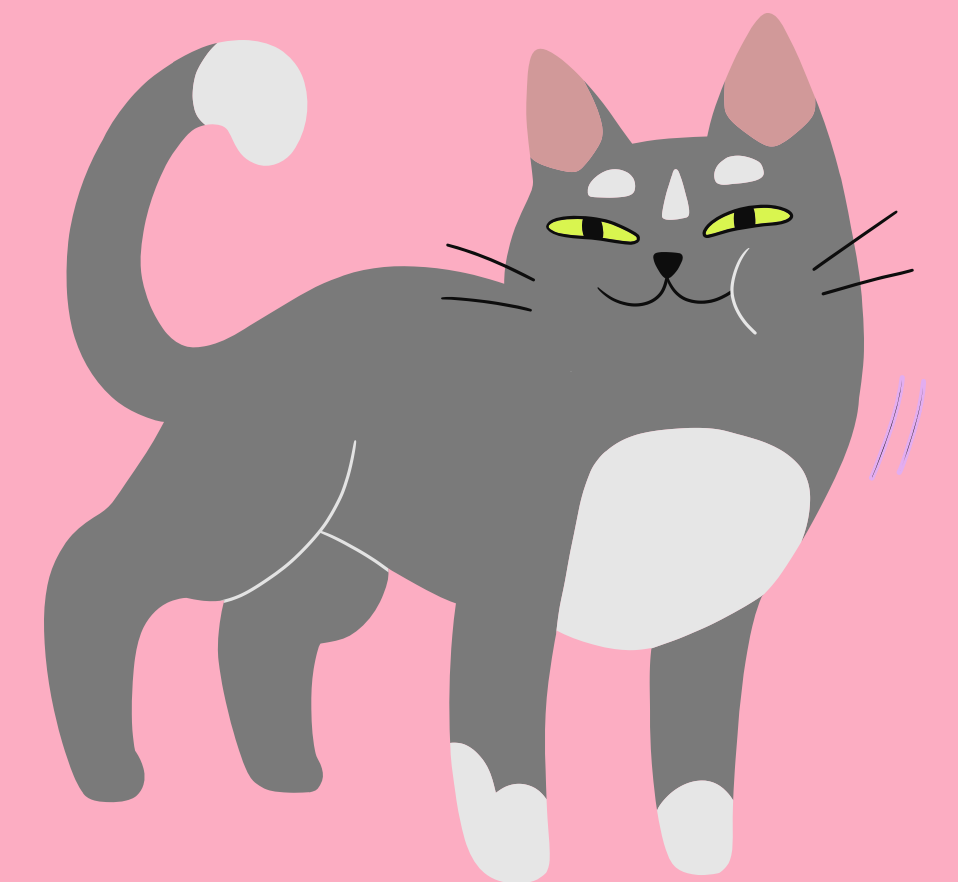
⁶Ellis, S, Kitten Socialization, Available at: <https://icatcare.org/app/uploads/2020/02/kitten-socialization.pdf>, Accessed: 10 January 2022

⁷Cromwell-Davis, SL, 2007, Cat Behaviour: Social Organization, Communication And Development, The Welfare Of Cats, Vol 3, pp. 1-22



What about adopting an older cat?

When considering adopting a cat that has passed the sensitive period, it is important to enquire about the cat's recent socialisation experiences and their reactions. Many rescue organisations provide foster care or trial periods where you have the opportunity to learn more about prospective new four-legged family members and make sure their personality is compatible with you and your family.



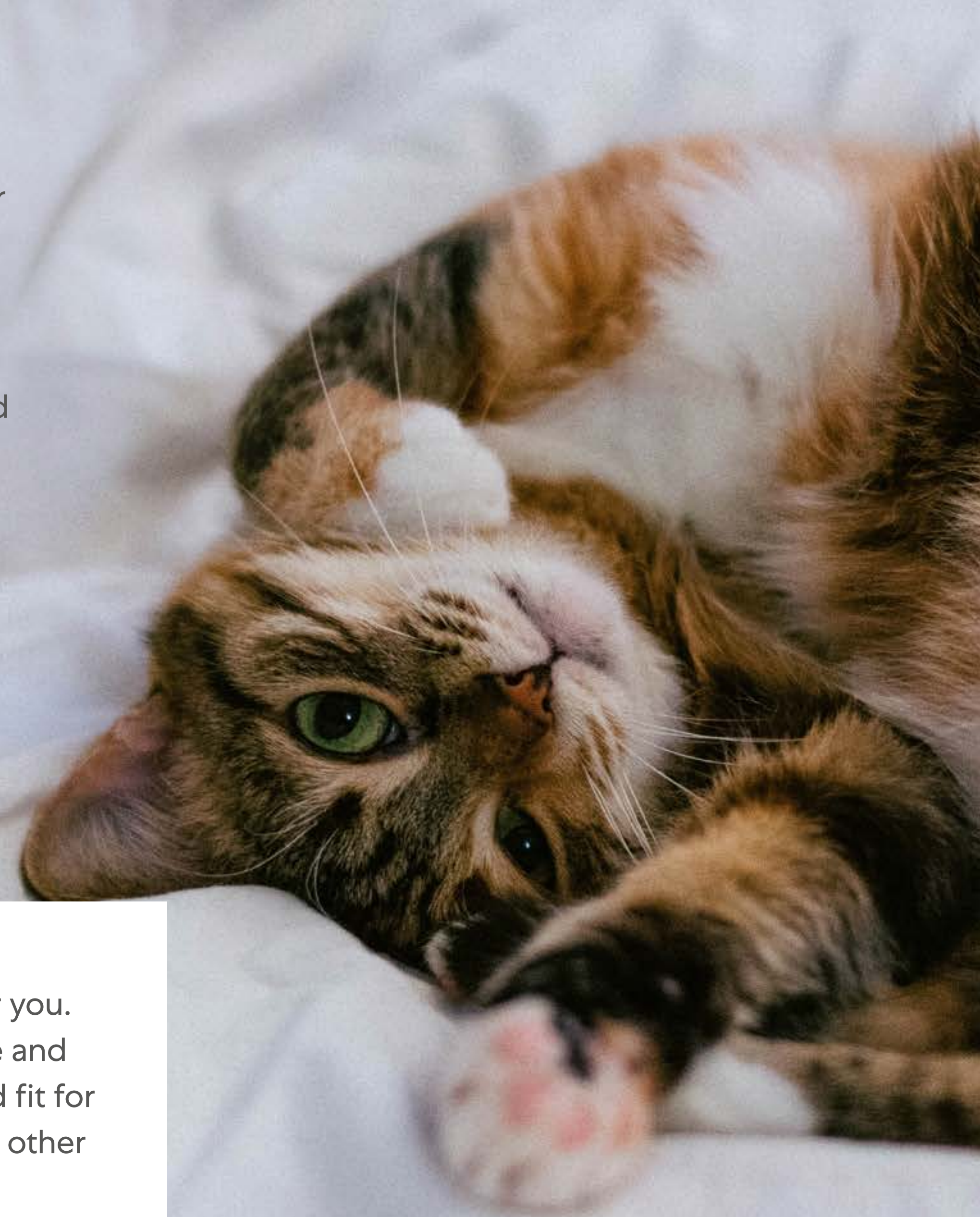
Questions to ask when adopting an older cat include⁸:

- Has the cat interacted with adults of both sexes, children and adolescents, as well as other animals? If so, do they behave in an appropriate manner?
- Has the cat interacted with other cats before, as well as other pets? How do they react?
- Have they lived in a home where they have been exposed to normal household sounds, such as a washing machine, vacuum cleaner and television? Do they have any fears related to these types of objects?
- Is there information on how they were raised, where they lived previously and how they behave in certain situations?
- Are they accustomed to using a litter tray?
- Is the cat trained to walk on a harness and lead?
- Are they used to visiting new places?
- Is the cat suffering from any health conditions?
- Have they displayed any fearful or aggressive behaviours before? If so, in what context?

Weighing up the answers and making a decision

If the answer to some of these is 'no', it doesn't necessarily mean that the cat isn't right for you. The answers to these questions will provide you with information regarding how sociable and healthy the cat is. This will help you make an informed decision on whether they are a good fit for you, your experience with cats, and your lifestyle. A cat that is fearful or aggressive around other animals, for example, is unlikely to be a good fit for a household with multiple pets.

⁸Serpell, J, McCune, S, 2018, WALTHAM™ pocket book of responsible pet ownership, Available at: https://www.waltham.com/sites/g/files/jydpvr1046/files/2020-05/responsible_pet_ownership_book_waltham.pdf, Accessed 09 January 2022





Setting up for success

For successful socialisation, your cat first needs to feel safe and secure. If your cat is feeling unsettled due to a recent change of environment (see [Environment](#)), or living situation where they feel in competition for resources (food, water, toys), now may not be the best time for a new socialisation experience. To set your cat up for a positive socialisation experience:⁹

- **Start early.** The sooner your kitten is exposed to a range of socialisation experiences in a positive manner, the better
- **Ensure everyone is relaxed.** When socialising young kittens, make sure their siblings and mother (the queen) are present, if possible, and that all cats are in the right mindset – relaxed and calm
- **Make sure your cat is ready for the next step.** Be guided by your cat's reaction. A little hesitation is ok but extreme fear and distress are not. Make sure your cat is in control of the interaction and can ultimately feel successful and empowered in overcoming a new challenge or experience
- **If adopting from a rescue organisation.** Enquire whether the shelter has provided a range of socialisation experiences prior to adoption

⁹Ellis, S, Kitten Socialization, Available at: <https://icatcare.org/app/uploads/2020/02/kitten-socialization.pdf>, Accessed: 10 January 2022

When socialising your cat, make sure you:

- **Have a plan.** At first, the number of new experiences young kittens are exposed to should be few and varied, then increased over time and repeated once they gain confidence
- **Keep sessions short.** Start with 15-minute sessions or even less and then slowly build up as your cat becomes more comfortable and confident
- **Know your cat.** Remember that each cat has their own personality and individual characteristics (see [Individuality](#)). Some cats will naturally be more outgoing and others more shy and reserved. Make sure that you adjust socialisation experiences, including the frequency, intensity and duration of exposure, dependent on the individual cat's needs and preferences
- **Understand how to monitor the situation.** Watch your cat carefully for signs of stress or agitation such as crouching, tail flicking or trying to hide, then intervene or end the session, if needed. If your cat balks when introducing them to the noise of the washing machine, next time try starting farther away, perhaps in the room adjacent with the door closed and gradually increase the exposure as your cat becomes more comfortable. (See [Introduction](#) for tips on reading a cat's body language)



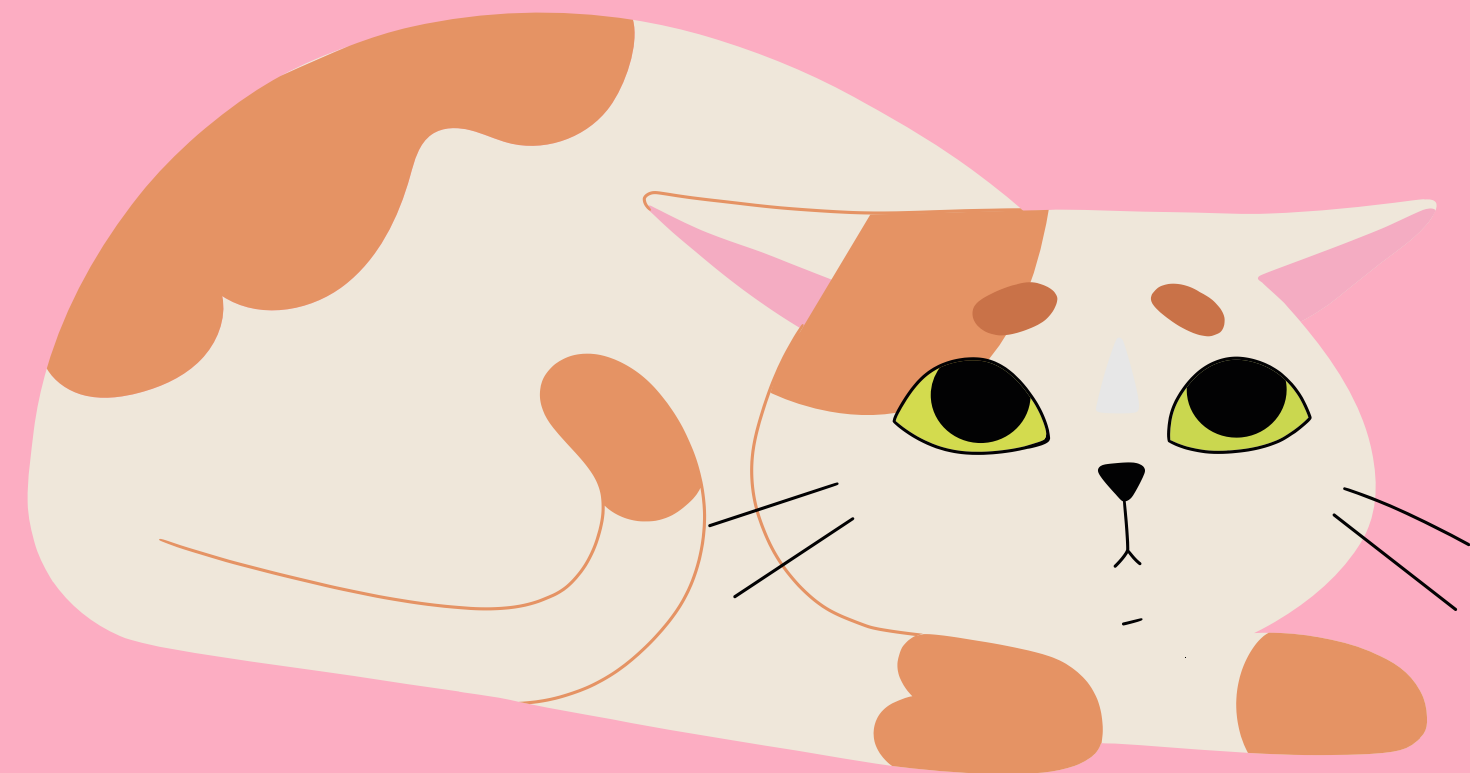


- **Praise and reward your cat.** Always reinforce demonstrations of desired positive behaviour or interactions with other people and animals. You should also build up a positive emotional response to the presence of particular objects (for example, the [cat carrier](#)) and being in certain places or situations (for example, the [car](#) or the [veterinary clinic](#)). Rewards can be used to help ensure a socialisation experience is a positive one, helping to improve emotional satisfaction. Rewards could be in the form of positive displays of affection, play/games and/or food/treats. Be mindful of what your cat likes and use these things during socialisation. Take care to treat responsibly (see [Nutrition](#))
- **Stay calm and composed** as you introduce them to the new experience, you should remain relaxed and confident throughout. Use a quiet voice and slow deliberate movements when handling. This makes it likely that your cat will respond accordingly and feel more secure
- **Get on their level.** To help make handling and other interactions with humans as non-threatening as possible it can be helpful to sit next to your cat. When introducing toys, you can also start with fishing rod-style toys to allow your cat to keep some distance so they feel more comfortable and in control of the interaction

Reading your cat's body language in social situations

By better understanding your cat's body language you can recognise situations where they feel uncomfortable, stressed or afraid and intervene on their behalf. This helps to prevent conflict and physical injury, as well as emotional trauma for all involved. Body language is also a powerful tool for recognising when your cat might be unwell (see [Health](#)) and can be used to guide positive socialisation and training experiences.

It is also important as it helps shape your understanding of what your cat likes and dislikes and how you interact with your cat. All of this is obviously key for optimal emotional wellbeing of your cat.

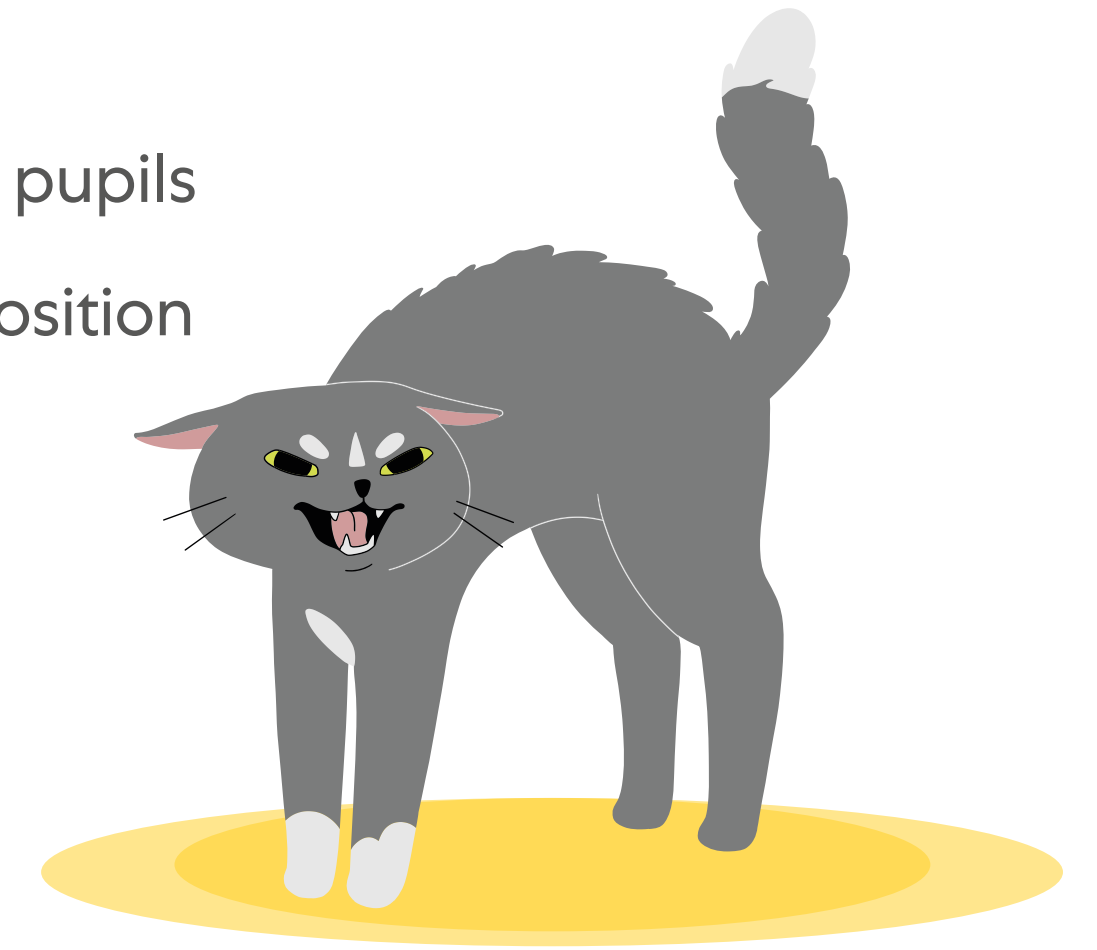


To find out more about your cat's behaviour and body language, follow [this link](#) and see [Introduction](#)



Warning signs that your cat is feeling stressed or afraid and may respond aggressively include:

- Wide, round eyes with dilated pupils
- Crouched or hunched body position
- Tense body language
- Tail twitching
- Hissing
- Swiping
- Open mouth, teeth bared
- Back arched, tail upright, fur standing on end



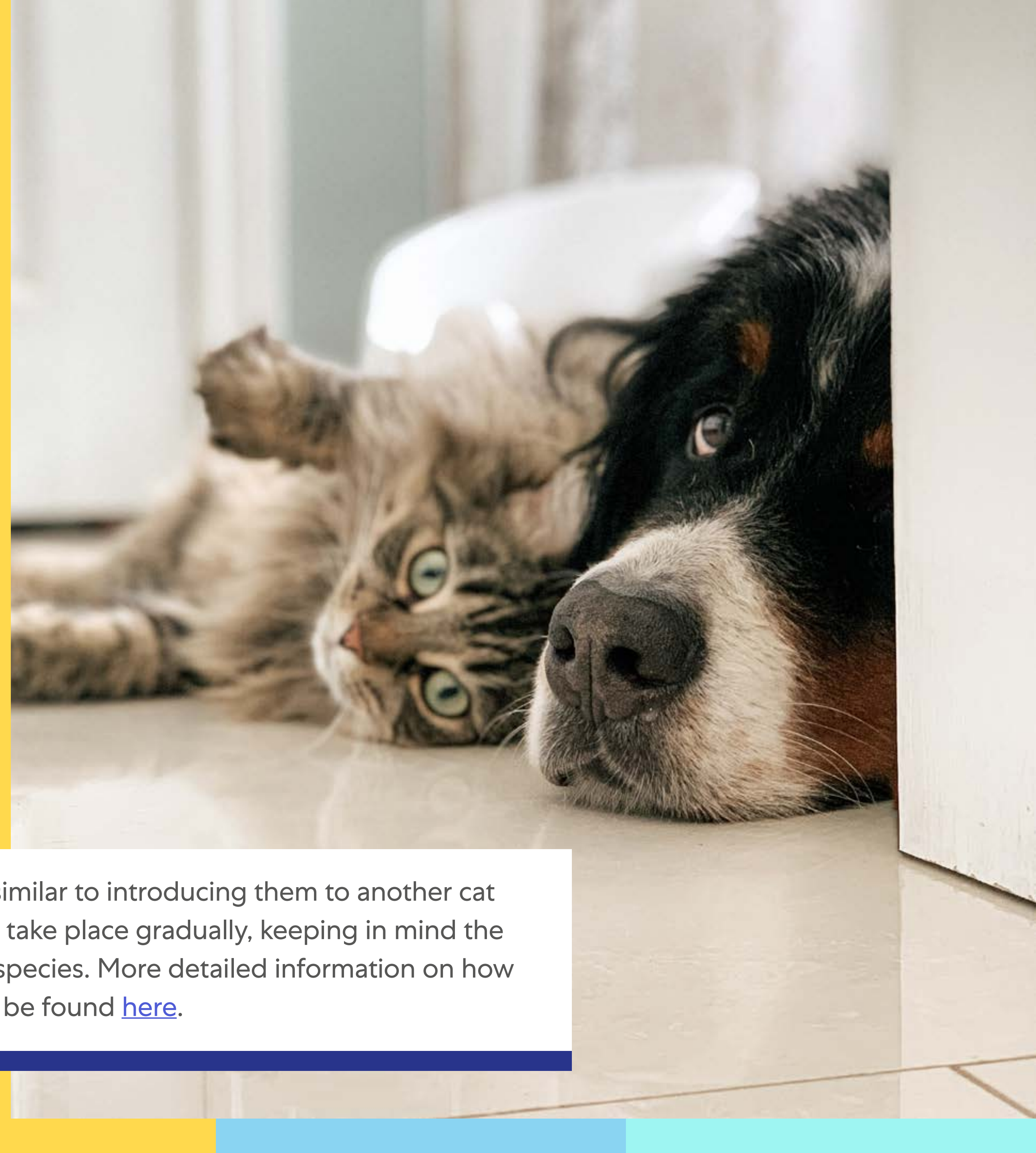
Feline body language can be subtle and the more you get to know your cat and understand their unique behaviours, the better you can respond and prevent situations that cause distress and help promote optimal emotional wellbeing. [This chart](#) provides an excellent visual reference for interpreting your cat's body language. See our document '[Socialisation with other cats](#)', for more information about cat-cat body language.

Socialisation with household pets and other animals

As part of a well-rounded socialisation programme, cats should be exposed to other pets and animals from kittenhood and beyond, especially if they live with or are likely to interact regularly with other species. Kittens that have positive exposure to other species, such as dogs, during the sensitive period are much more likely to form bonds with these animals in later life. Friendships can still form when a cat is older but it is a little more difficult and will depend on the personalities and characteristics of the individual cat and dog (see [Individuality](#)).

Cats that have not been well socialised with other animals often find it more difficult to cope if they're then forced to live alongside them. As a result these pets may experience deteriorations in their mental and emotional health. Remember as well that cats are natural predators and extreme care should be taken to avoid contact with smaller 'prey' species like pet rabbits, guinea pigs, mice, rats, birds, and reptiles. Not only could this result in physical harm to these pets, but your cat's presence can also cause severe stress and fear to these smaller animals.

When introducing cats to other animals, the process is very similar to introducing them to another cat (see our document [Socialisation With Other Cats](#)) and should take place gradually, keeping in mind the safety, behaviour and individual preferences of all interacting species. More detailed information on how to introduce cats to other pets can be found [here](#).





Social changes and their impact on behaviour

Most generally cats do not like change unless it is providing them with a source of enrichment. Cats like to remain in control of their environment, or at the very least, have some ability to predict change or find a safe place to ride it out. Social changes including new family members, new pets, visitors or a new baby can all be extremely stressful to cats as they often occur unpredictably and without warning.

This is where a well-socialised cat that has been exposed to a wide variety of people, animals and situations from a young age is more likely to adjust and less likely to develop behavioural issues. On the other hand, in response to social changes, some cats may even urinate or defecate outside their litter box. They may also display other undesirable behaviours such as aggression, urine spraying, or scratching the furniture to mark their territory and help them feel more secure.

Social changes and their impact on behaviour

These behaviours are understandably frustrating for many owners and can have a negative impact on the human-cat relationship, even leading to welfare issues like re-homing or euthanasia if the problem is not resolved¹⁰. It's important to understand, however, that these behaviours are a response to stress and anxiety, indicating that your cat is struggling to cope with the new social situation. Seeking the professional advice of a veterinarian and/or a qualified veterinary behaviourist (see below) is key for successfully managing these problems and improving quality of life for your cat.

For more information on how you can help your cat cope with change, see [Environment](#).

Recommended professional associations for choosing a qualified behaviourist or trainer:

[International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants](#)

[Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors \(International\)](#)

[Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists \(America\)](#)

[American College of Veterinary Behaviorists](#)

Learn more about socialisation and emotional wellbeing for your pets at shine.waltham.com

¹⁰Casey, 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

