

The effects of additional socialisation for kittens in a rescue centre on their behaviour and suitability as a pet

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Abstract

The effects of handling during the socialisation period on the subsequent development of behaviour problems and the cat–owner bond have been investigated in kittens homed from rescue centres. Thirty-seven kittens in three centres were given either standard socialisation or enhanced socialisation between 2 and 9 weeks of age. All kittens were then homed, and their owners were interviewed when they were approximately 1-year-old. Owners of additionally socialised kittens reported significantly higher emotional support from their cats, and fewer of these cats exhibited behaviour indicative of fear of humans, compared to cats that had received standard socialisation.

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1. Introduction

In recent years the number of cats (*Felis silvestris catus*) kept as pets in the UK has surpassed the number of dogs: approximately 8 million cats were owned by 5 million households in the UK in 2000 (PFMA, 2000). The popularity of cats as pets is generally held to be because they offer affection and companionship, but are easier to care for than dogs (Zasloff and Kidd, 1994). However, friendliness varies substantially between individual cats (Karsh and Turner, 1998). The friendliness shown by individual cats towards their owners is obviously an important factor in the

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success of their relationship: in most circumstances people seeking a pet prefer an affectionate cat (Archer, 1997).

It is well established that variability in friendliness towards humans in cats is influenced by complex interactions between genetic factors and specific learning experiences (Mendl and Harcourt, 2000). Studies in a range of different species have suggested that plasticity to learning about environmental stimuli is more pronounced in particular 'sensitive periods' of development than others (Bateson, 1979). In companion animals a sensitive period that occurs in the weeks after birth, during which social contact with humans is necessary to prevent the development of fearful responses towards people later in life, is generally referred to as the 'socialisation period' (McCune et al., 1995). The effects of specific social experiences during this period can be profound: for example, Kuo (1930) found that kittens reared with rats become "socialised" to them, despite the fact that rats are naturally a prey species for cats.

In a series of experiments, Karsh (reported in Karsh and Turner, 1998) identified the socialisation period in cats as beginning at 2 weeks of age, and coming to an end, apparently spontaneously, at about 7 weeks of age. In addition, she determined that increasing the period of handling from 15 to 40 min per day significantly increased the period of time kittens spent in close contact with testers at 14 weeks of age (Karsh and Turner, 1998). Handling of kittens during this period appears to have long-term effects on behaviour, as beneficial effects of 5 h of handling per week between 2 and 12 weeks of age were detectable in approaches to both familiar and unfamiliar people at 1 year of age (McCune, 1995). Collard (1967) reported that kittens handled by 5 people made fewer attempts to escape from a stranger than those handled by one person or not handled at all. In addition, it has been suggested that experience of specific stimuli, such as contact with handlers of a particular sex, will differentially affect perception of men and women when kittens reach adulthood (McCune et al., 1995).

The sensitive period for socialisation to people comes to an end in the seventh or eighth week of life, irrespective of whether humans have been encountered or not, and may be terminated by the onset of a fear reaction towards all unfamiliar animate stimuli. For cats whose socialisation to people has begun before the end of the sensitive period, reactions to humans continue to change over the next 2 months or so. Differential effects of the amount of handling received during the socialisation period on reaction to handling have been detected at 4 months of age, but not thereafter in pet cats (Lowe and Bradshaw, 2002). Reactions to handling were found to be broadly consistent between 4 and 33 months, suggesting that this aspect of behavioural "style" is mainly formed in the first 4 months of life (Lowe and Bradshaw, 2002).

It is likely, therefore, that a variety of experience during the 'socialisation period' in kittenhood will add to the quality of the human–cat relationship later in the cat's life (McCune et al., 1995). There have not, however, been any studies investigating the effect of varying the quality and quantity of socialisation on the longer-term behavioural "styles" (Mendl and Harcourt, 2000) of cats, or on quality of the owner–cat relationship.

It is commonly the situation that rescue shelters hold a large number of kittens, either brought in at a young age, or born within the shelter. Although their physical care in such centres is generally very good, the social and physical stimuli that they experience are inevitably different, and generally less varied, than those experienced by kittens born into domestic environments. In shelters, close handling of individual kittens by a range of different people is also limited by constraints on staff time.

The aim of this study is to investigate the effect of an additional programme of 'socialisation' given to kittens whilst in a rescue shelter, on the occurrence of owner reported behaviour problems, and the reported level of emotional support, 1 year after homing.

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