

Physical & Behavioral Development of Kittens for the First 6 Weeks of Life

WEEK 1



Physical Development

- Unable to regulate own body temperature for a few weeks
- Rely on the sense of touch, smell, & temperature to navigate world
- Licking by the mother keeps kittens warm and stimulates their digestion & elimination
- Double their birth weight in 1st week of life; undergo rapid growth—equivalent of several months for human babies

Behavioral Development

- Able to move towards warmth right after birth; don't do much socially but need the warmth of their mother & siblings
- Able to identify their mother with pinpoint accuracy
- At 2 days of age purring starts; by 5 days able to respond to sounds

Physical Development

- Gains in sensory and motor skills
- Eyes open & begin to see blurry images (at 7-10 days on average)
- Ears unfold, improving ability to hear
- Sense of smell improves
- Gaining strength and motor skills

Behavioral Development

- By 10 days, exhibit conditioned responses to sounds; by 2 weeks, orient to natural sounds; respond to mother's commands
- Can recognize distinct odors; may hiss at unfamiliar scents
- May test out wobbly legs, with caution; beginning of independence from the mother; start of exploration
- Formation of social relationships; will sniff & paw at littermates; majority of grooming still done by the mother but will begin now or at 3 weeks to start self-grooming & grooming of siblings
- Development of predatory behavior

WEEK 2



Physical Development

- Continued gains in sensory and motor skills, some reaching adult states
- Better at regulating their own body temperature
- Rudimentary walking emerges
- Vision improves rapidly
- Weaning begins; decrease in initiation of nursing bouts by the mother in preparation for weaning; first teeth appear
- Voluntary elimination starts at between 3-5 weeks

Behavioral Development

- Less snuggling needed with mother and littermates, leading to more independence
- Visual orienting and following objects;
- Visual orientation to the nest
- Litter box can be introduced
- Expansion of the socialization period: social play emerges—life is a party at this point

WEEK 3



Physical Development

- Adult-like orienting
- Adult-like hearing and vision
- Better coordination and motor skills
- Weaning is well underway
- Usually a dramatic growth burst; most doubled weight gain by now
- Teeth continue to come in
- Much better at body temperature regulation

Behavioral Development

- Visual orienting and obstacle avoidance; begin to stray farther from the nest
- Can learn tasks with visual cues alone
- Queen brings live prey to the nest; begins to show hunting skills
- Solitary play declines, group play more common; spend most awake hours playing with littermates & grooming one another
- Begin to interact with humans & other animals in their environment on a regular basis
- Dominance hierarchies forming

WEEK 4



WEEK 5



Physical Development

- Running emerges
- Basic skills, like hearing, vision, and locomotion, are well developed but still don't have the grace of an adult feline
- Weaning is well underway but nursing continues

Behavioral Development

- Engages in complex interactions that make up typical kitten play; hides while playing
- Starts to kill prey
- Able to successfully use a litter box; elimination substrate preference begins to develop

Physical Development

- Time of growth and strengthening of the kitten physique, as well as refinement of sensory-motor skills
- Capable of all the gaits exhibited by adults
- Full control of elimination functions
- Eating solid food several times a day
- Baby teeth still erupting

Behavioral Development

- Engages in complex interactions that make up typical kitten play due to new-found mobility and coordination; show more adult response to threatening visual and olfactory stimuli (e.g., mild pilferaction to cat silhouette)
- Asserting even more independence from mom, with or without littermates
- May be chewing on everything in the house (due to teething)
- Emulating daily routines of mom
- Cope with regular handling by humans

WEEK 6

