

CHOOSING A KITTEN: HERE'S WHAT YOU SHOULD LOOK FOR

When most people select a cat for their household, they often rely on appearance — especially the color of the coat — and some real or imagined chemistry with the animal. But by considering several other characteristics as well, you may dramatically increase the chances for a long and beautiful friendship. Here's why.

"It is very important for the cat to have experienced a good early experience with humans, from the second week or life through the seventh," explains Dr. Katherine Houpt, VMD, PhD, and the emeritus James Law professor of behavior at Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine. "If you find a barn cat with kittens that are two months old, they are essentially going to be wild animals. That doesn't mean they can't become pets, but the task will be a lot harder."

Kittens need to live with their mom and littermates to learn manners. Adopting a kitten too early — unless there's a medical reason — can result in issues as the cat becomes an adult. We often see notices offering kittens to a good home, and neighbors are coaxed into coming over and scooping up a bundle of joy to adopt on the spot. When adopted prematurely, however, kittens will cry more and weaning will be more difficult. Experts feel it's best to wait until the kittens are eight to 12 weeks old.

Early handling is important. A lot of interaction with humans and training by the mother are both important in increasing the likelihood that a young cat will make a successful adjustment to your household — to human adults and children, and to dogs and other cats as well.

Breed can also be a factor in feline behavior. For example, Persians and Himalayans tend to be placid, while Siamese and Abyssinians are active and energetic. Regardless of breed — purebred or mixed — gender seems to make a difference. Male cats tend to be more friendly to people and less friendly to other cats. And information about the cat's father, if available, can be helpful in predicting temperament. Experts feel that a mellow, friendly father often results in mellow and friendly kittens.

How to assess temperament. There are a number of ways you can assess the temperament of a kitten. Try dropping something on the floor. A very defensive, shy cat may retire under the bed for a couple of hours. Experts suggest that you try to choose a bolder cat with a friendly, outgoing personality.

Indoor or outdoor? Once you acquire the young cat, experts stress that he or she should live indoors, if possible. Indoor cats usually live longer and are healthier than outdoor cats. Outdoor cats get into fights, are more prone to disease and accidents, and cause problems for birds, wildlife, gardens and children's sandboxes.

According to Dr. Houpt: "If you want an only cat, choose a male. It will probably sit in your lap more, knead you with his paws more, possibly be more playful. If you want a pair of cats, make both of them females."