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Teach your cat about playtime at kittengarten

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LINDA LOMBARDI • ASSOCIATED PRESS • JANUARY 7, 2009 • FROM LANSING STATE JOURNAL

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For the kittens dashing and tumbling around the room, the Washington Humane Society's first Kittengarten class is all about the playtime.

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But for the humans and the shelter there's a bigger goal: making sure that cats are healthy and happy in their adoptive homes - and that they stay there.

Kittengarten is just like what it sounds, a class for kittens and their owners. Along with kitten socialization and grooming, the four-week class covers basic health and behavior facts, including nutrition. While dog owners have long taken their charges for training, cat owners don't always know that they and their pets could use some guidance too, organizers say.

Even those knowledgeable about cats can really benefit from some hands-on practice, as when trainer Hanna Lentz demonstrates the most important grooming basic for a pet with needle-sharp claws: the nail trim.

Lentz crouches on the ground, holding a kitten with its back to her, and touches its shoulders. "A cat's natural instinct when you touch them up here is to back up," she explains, "so they have nowhere else to go." Next, she clips a nail. "Do that: one nail, treat, relax in between," she says. "Taking it slow can really make a huge difference."

The students, sitting at the table with piles of treats in front of them, attempt to follow her example on the squirming, reluctant little felines.

"They're not born liking to get their nails trimmed," Lentz observes. "It's so important to start when they're kittens."

While kitten kindergarten is new in Washington, the idea has been around for a while. Elise Gouge of the Houston SPCA, where they've been offering a course since early 2007, says she wishes she could get everyone to take it.




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she says. "They don't instantly love people, they don't know not to scratch the furniture."

The first kitten kindergarten is generally acknowledged to have been the idea of Kersti Seksel, a veterinary behaviorist in Australia. Cat behavior consultant and veterinarian Ilona Rodan brought the idea to this country in 2004 and held classes at her cat practice in Madison, Wis., for a while; she's now working on a CD that presents the information for cat owners who don't have the opportunity to take a class.

Beyond the basics of cat care and behavior, people also need to know how to play with their pets and provide a mentally enriching environment.

"As a feline specialist I see people who are crazy about their cats. This cat means everything to them, but do they do the right thing for them?" Rodan says. "They don't, because they don't understand them."

Rodan is enthusiastic about the idea of holding these classes in shelters. Often, those adopting cats don't think that cats need regular preventative health care, she says. The class is a place to make that connection.

For the shelters, these classes are a way to keep cats in homes, by helping people to understand they can often deal with behavioral issues rather than returning a cat to the shelter.

"People underestimate how willing a cat will be to work with you," Gouge says. "They're not motivated by just our love. You'll have to do a little better than that - maybe a little cheese or a little piece of shrimp."

Gouge says that training and education can help people keep their cats by solving specific problems, but there's more to it than that: working with their pets creates a bond that results in more of a commitment.

"We'll teach them how to sit and how to give paw," she says. "I've had cases with people who were thinking of surrendering their cat. We taught them some of that stuff and it's saved the relationship."

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