

A HANDBOOK FOR NEW ADOPTERS



Pouf & Beans

*Everything we wish we'd known
about raising a kitten well.*

with love, from our home to yours

What's inside

01 The Foundation *Why this handbook exists — and what to expect from the kitten you're about to bring home.*

02 Food & Water *What we feed Pouf & Beans, and why we made the choices we did.*

03 Litter *The smell-free, clay-free system we settled on after trying everything.*

04 Health & Vet Care *How to keep them well, and what to watch for if something feels off.*

05 Bonding & Connection *The small daily rituals that turn a kitten into family.*

06 Play *Twenty minutes a day of the right kind of play is the highest-leverage thing you can do.*

07 Bringing Them Home *The first 72 hours shape everything that comes after. Here's how to do them well.*

Chapter 01

The Foundation

Why this handbook exists — and what to expect from the kitten you're about to bring home.

A Letter From Us

Hi there 🙌

Thank you for being here. If you're reading this, you're seriously considering bringing one of our kittens into your family — and we don't take that lightly. Neither should you.

The honest story: we didn't plan this. We thought we had two boys. Spoiler — we had one boy (Pouf) and one girl (Beans), and we found out the way you'd expect. So instead of a polished cattery, you're getting six absurdly adorable Birman × Siamese Tabby kittens raised in our home, on our lap, learning the world from arguably one of the best feline dads on the planet.

We made this handbook because we learned that the what the pet store, the kibble bag, or the average vet recommends actually matches what a cat needs to live a long, healthy, happy life. We went down the rabbit holes. We read the research. We followed the holistic vets, the raw-feeders, the behaviorists, the breeders who've been doing this for decades. We've been fosters for years and also helped to rehabilitated traumatized cats. We also watched Pouf and Beans tell us what works.

This is the distilled version — the “if I could only tell you the things that matter” version. It's biased toward what we believe, but every belief is sourced. You can verify any of it.

If our approach resonates, you're going to love being a cat parent. If it doesn't — if this sounds like too much, or too “alternative,” or too much effort — we love you for being honest with yourself. The kittens deserve the right home, not just any home.

With love, [Your names] (and Pouf 🐱 and Beans 🐱)

Our Philosophy

Five things to know about how we think about cats. Everything else flows from these.

1. Cats are family, not pets. Not décor. Not accessories. They're sentient beings who bond, grieve, communicate, and grow up alongside us. We treat them like family because that's what they are.

2. We think from first principles. “The vet recommends it” or “it's the #1 brand” isn't proof of anything. Pet food and pet medicine are industries — and industries optimize for profit, not lifespan. We ask: *what is a cat, biologically?* A cat is an obligate carnivore. So we feed meat, not corn. The rest follows.

3. We optimize for *their* longevity, not *our* convenience. Kibble is shelf-stable. Annual vaccines are billable. Clumping litter is easy. Single cats are simpler. Almost every “easy” choice trades the cat’s lifespan for our convenience. We can help them live long and healthy lives by the choices we make.

4. Health is holistic. Physical, environmental, emotional, and energetic health are one system. You can’t feed a cat perfectly and then plug in a fragrance diffuser. The whole picture matters.

5. We’re skeptical of industrial pet culture — *with sources*. Big pet food. Over-vaccination. Plastic everything. “Complete and balanced” labels on bags of corn. We push back on a lot — but never from vibes. Every counter-mainstream recommendation here is sourced. Verify anything. Disagree if you want. Just don’t outsource your thinking.

How to Use This Handbook

- **Read it once, cover to cover, before your kitten comes home.** It’s not that long.
- **Keep it as a reference.** The Cheat Sheet at the back is designed to print and stick on your fridge.
- **Click the links.** Every source is linked. The shopping list goes straight to the products we use.
- **Ask us anything.** Truly. You’re family now too — our info is at the end.
- **Don’t take any single recommendation as gospel — including ours.** Use your judgment. Watch your cat. They’ll tell you what’s working.

Let’s go. 🐾

Part 1 — Before They Come Home

Is This the Right Home? (The Honest Self-Filter)

Before you fall in love with the photos (too late, we know 😞), read this carefully. Adopting one of these kittens is a 15–20 year commitment to a sentient family member. We’d rather you self-select out now than realize three months in that you need to rehome them because it’s not convenient.

You’re probably the right fit if you:

- See cats as family, not pets
- Will feed high-quality wet food or raw (no kibble as a primary)
- Will clean a litter box daily

- ✓ Will play with your cat for at least 20 minutes a day
- ✓ Will keep a fragrance-free, low-tox home (no plug-ins, scented candles, harsh cleaners, oil diffusers)
- ✓ Won't just defer to the vet without asking *why*
- ✓ Are taking a bonded pair, or have a compatible cat at home
- ✓ Can commit financially — good food, vet visits, and a thoughtful setup aren't cheap
- ✓ Will keep your cat indoors with supervised outdoor access (catio, leash, supervised yard)
- ✓ Are emotionally available — cats know when you're checked out

Maybe reconsider if you:

- ✗ Want a “low-maintenance” cat
- ✗ “kibble isn't that bad” or because it's convenient
- ✗ Travel constantly with no plan for someone to be home with them
- ✗ Won't commit to *at least* one feline companion
- ✗ Aren't open to skipping practices we feel strongly against (over-vaccination-, spay/neuter too early, mostly indoor)
- ✗ Aren't willing to ditch the fragranced, chemically-cleaned home
- ✗ See the cat as primarily there to enhance *your* life — rather than mutually beneficial


Still here and nodding? Welcome to the family.

Adopt in Pairs — or Have a Buddy Ready

This is non-negotiable for us. It's one of the kindest things you can do for your cat.

Kittens thrive with a buddy. They:

- Play-fight with each other (so much less aggression toward you and your furniture)
- Groom each other — it's how cats say *I love you*
- Self-regulate when you're not home
- Learn cat manners from another cat (you can't teach a cat to be a cat)
- Live longer, happier, less anxious lives

 **The Science Behind It** The single-cat household is a human invention. In feral colonies, cats live in matrilineal family groups and form deep social bonds with chosen kin. A solo indoor cat with no feline company is often quietly lonely — and that loneliness shows up as overgrooming, aggression, destructive behavior, or just a flatter personality than they were born with.

If you don't already have a cat-friendly cat at home, **we'll only adopt out to homes taking two kittens** — or to single-kitten homes with a confirmed compatible companion. Two kittens is barely more work than one. They entertain each other.

Photo

Two kittens curled up sleeping, or play-fighting

Kitten-Proofing Your Home

Kittens are tiny chaos demons with no concept of mortality. Before they come home, do a slow walk through your space at their height and look for trouble.

The basics

- **Cords and cables** — bundle, hide, or use cord protectors. They chew everything.
- **Candles** — never lit and unattended. Their tails *will* go through a flame.
- **Open windows and balconies** — falls from height are a real, common emergency. Screens or supervision only.
- **Toilet lids closed** — kittens fall in. And drink from there. No.
- **Small swallowable things** — hair ties, rubber bands, twist ties, ribbon, dental floss. Strings are the worst offender (see below).
- **Kitten safe toys** — avoid toys that shed (rope scratching stands, wire ribbon, toys with tinsel or plastic threads)
- **Dryers and washing machines** — always check before closing.
- **Reclining furniture** — kittens get crushed in the mechanism. Recline slowly or avoid.

⚠️ **Skip shedding toys the first year.** Rope scratching posts, wire ribbon wands, toys with tinsel, plastic threads, or even googly eyes — anything that can come loose can get swallowed. We bought this spiral toy and the kittens absolutely loved it, but it sheds wire and plastic from the ribbon, which they immediately started eating. We covered it in fleece fabric and now it's perfect. Lesson: it's not always the toy itself — it's what comes off it.

The home environment


This is the stuff most kitten-proofing guides skip — and it matters as much as the physical hazards.

- **Cleaning products** — switch to non-toxic, fragrance-free, pet-safe. White vinegar and baking soda do almost everything bleach does, without the residue your cat will lick off her paws. Skip Lysol/Pine-Sol-type phenol cleaners — toxic to cats.
- **Fragrance plug-ins, scented candles, air fresheners, scented trash bags, scented detergent** — all out. Cats live close to the ground and breathe in 100% of what you use.
- **Dryer sheets and fabric softener** — coat fabrics (including the bedding your cat sleeps on) in chemicals that transfer to their coat and they'll groom it off. Skip.
- **Cat carriers, rugs, or other plastic based material**— can off-gas toxins for days. Smell check and air out outside before use.

🧬 **The Science Behind It** Cats' livers can't process most household chemicals the way ours can — they're missing a key enzyme that humans and dogs use to break compounds down and clear them out. So things land in their system and stay. Add constant grooming, and anything that touches their fur ends up in their stomach within the hour.

The Hidden Toxins Most Adopters Don't Know About

This is the section we wish someone had handed us. It's not just food or cleaners — it's everyday personal care products and medications that transfer from *your* skin to your pillowcase to your cat's fur. Many are **lethal in tiny amounts**, and almost no cat guide covers them.

 **The Science Behind It** Cats can't break down most chemicals the way we do. So small, repeated exposures *accumulate*. And because cats groom constantly, anything on your hands, pillow, blanket, or robe goes onto their fur → into their stomach → straight into a liver that can't clear it.

How toxins reach your cat (the part most people miss)

- **Pillowcases and bedding** — anything you apply before bed transfers to your pillow. Your cat sleeps there. Then grooms.
- **Towels and robes** — products on your skin transfer when you dry off.
- **Hands and arms** — you applied something, then petted your cat without washing.
- **Furniture and clothes** — leave-on hair and skin products migrate to couches, blankets, sweaters.
- **The bathroom counter** — products drip, spill, or get knocked over. Cats walk through it.

The fix is mostly behavioral: wash hands after applying anything, change pillowcases often, cover treated skin, and keep products behind cabinet doors.

Don't Do This — The Lethal Topicals

These deserve their own warning. They've killed cats from amounts you'd never imagine.

- **Minoxidil (Rogaine)** — extraordinarily toxic. Cats have died from licking a few drops off an owner's scalp, or sleeping on a Rogaine pillowcase overnight. Causes heart failure. No antidote. If anyone in your home uses minoxidil, the cat *cannot* share a pillow with them.
- **5-Fluorouracil (Efudex, Carac)** — topical chemo cream for skin cancer. Rapidly fatal in cats from minimal exposure. ([Merck Vet Manual](#))
- **Calcipotriene / Calcipotriol (Dovonex, Taclonex)** — topical psoriasis cream. Tiny doses cause fatal blood-calcium spikes. ([VetGirl](#))
- **Tacrolimus (Protopic)** and other topical immunosuppressants — toxic.
- **Estrogen, testosterone, hormone replacement creams** — skin-to-skin transfer disrupts hormones, bone marrow, and reproduction. ([UConn Pharmacy](#))
- **Lidocaine patches, capsaicin patches, Salonpas, Bengay, IcyHot** — cats lick the residue.
- **Benzoyl peroxide** acne treatments — toxic.
- **Permethrin / pyrethrin dog flea & tick products** — never on a cat, and don't let your cat groom a recently-treated dog. Many cats die from this exact mistake.

Beauty & personal care to be careful with

- **Sunscreens with zinc oxide or salicylates** (octyl salicylate, homosalate, etc.) — includes mineral sunscreens and diaper rash creams like Desitin. ([ASPCA](#))
- **Self-tanner (DHA)** — ingestion risk via grooming.
- **Acetone nail polish & remover** — do nails in a ventilated room, keep the cat out until it airs.
- **Hair dye, perms, keratin treatments** — formaldehyde and ammonia. Keep the cat out during application and for hours after.
- **Hand sanitizer** — don't pet the cat until it fully evaporates.
- **Retinoids** (Retin-A, tretinoin, retinol, Tazorac) — accumulate via grooming and pillowcase transfer.
- **Salicylic acid** (acne products, BHA serums, wart removers) — cats can't process salicylates (same family as aspirin).
- **Anything with essential oils** — see below. *Natural ≠ safe for cats.*

Oral medications — lethal doses are tiny

Never give your cat human medication without explicit vet direction.

- **Acetaminophen (Tylenol)** — a single regular-strength pill can kill a cat. Destroys red blood cells, fails the liver. ([NIH case report](#))
- **Ibuprofen (Advil), naproxen (Aleve)** — kidney failure, stomach ulcers.
- **Aspirin, Pepto-Bismol, Kaopectate** — even half a tablespoon of Pepto can poison a cat.
- **ADHD meds (Adderall, Ritalin, Vyvanse)** — cats are extremely sensitive to amphetamines.
- **SSRIs, SNRIs, sleep aids (Ambien)** — toxic in small doses.
- **Pseudoephedrine (Sudafed)** — toxic.
- **Vitamin D supplements** — high doses cause calcium spikes and kidney failure.
- **Cannabis / THC (including edibles)** — disorientation, seizures. Increasingly common with edibles left out.

Keep all meds behind closed cabinet doors. Weekly pill organizers on counters are dangerous — cats knock them over or chew them open.

Essential oils — a dedicated warning

You'd think “natural” oils would be safer than synthetic fragrances. They're not. Cats can't process the compounds in essential oils, so even small amounts accumulate and can cause liver damage, breathing problems, seizures, and death.

That includes diffusing into the air — droplets land on the cat’s fur, she grooms, she ingests. It also includes anything that *contains* essential oils: shampoos, lotions, soaps, candles, room sprays, “natural” cleaners, scented laundry products.

Especially toxic (assume any concentrated oil is unsafe):

Tea tree (the worst — deaths from owner-applied “holistic” use), eucalyptus, peppermint, wintergreen, cinnamon, clove, citrus oils (lemon, lime, orange, grapefruit, bergamot), pine, ylang ylang, lavender, thyme, oregano, pennyroyal, geranium, lemongrass, basil.

Per [Pet Poison Helpline](#), [Merck Vet Manual](#), [Hill’s Pet](#), and [PetMD](#): there are no essential oils reliably safe to diffuse around cats. We just don’t.

Try This Tonight

Open your bathroom cabinet and your nightstand. Anything in the list above — move it behind a closed cabinet door before your kitten arrives. Then swap your pillowcase for a fresh one tomorrow morning. Those two small changes prevent more accidents than anything else in this section.

Quick Action — If You Suspect Poisoning

Don’t wait. Don’t induce vomiting unless instructed. Call right away:

- **ASPCA Animal Poison Control: (888) 426-4435**
- **Pet Poison Helpline: (855) 764-7661**
- Or your nearest emergency vet.

Both hotlines have a consultation fee and toxicologists on staff. Bring the product packaging. **Time matters more than money.**

Food & Water Bowls

We didn’t think a guide would need a section on *bowls*. Then we went down the rabbit hole. Short version: **the bowls you feed your cat from matter way more than the pet industry tells you.**

Don’t Do This — Plastic & Ceramic

Plastic bowls: - Microplastics and BPA leach into food and water (worse with acidic wet food) - Tiny scratches harbor bacteria you can’t clean out - Cause feline chin acne — a real, documented condition - Hold onto odors forever


Ceramic bowls: - Lead in glazes is still a real risk (especially imported, artisanal, or older bowls) - Even high-quality ceramic develops invisible cracks over time that trap bacteria - Chip a glaze and the raw clay underneath starts touching food.


If you love a ceramic look, you'd need lead-free certification, food-safety country of origin, and a replacement the moment you see any chip. Fyi, same for your kitchen! Easier to skip.


“Stainless Steel” Alone Isn’t Enough


Here’s the one that broke our brains. **Not all stainless steel is safe to eat from.**


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Grade What it is Safe for food? -----
----- **304 (“18/8” or “18/10”)** The gold standard  FDA-approved for food contact

316 / 316L Adds molybdenum for extra corrosion resistance  Used in medical equipment

200-series (201, 202) Manganese subbed in for nickel to cut cost  Leaches into acidic food



301, 430 Lower-grade industrial steel  Can leach nickel and chromium, especially when scratched -

 **The Science Behind It** A [peer-reviewed study](#) found that cooking acidic food in stainless steel increased nickel up to 26-fold and chromium up to 7-fold, depending on the grade. New bowls leach the most, and leaching never fully stops. For a cat eating wet food out of the same bowl twice a day for 15–20 years, this adds up.

The catch: if you buy a “stainless steel” pet bowl at Target, Walmart, or most pet stores, **there’s a real chance it’s lower-grade industrial steel.** [Lucky Feral’s stainless steel bowl test](#) walked through her entire collection of “stainless” pet bowls from major retailers — most failed.

Try This Tonight — Test Your Bowls

If you already have stainless bowls, here’s how to check them:

1. The free magnet test. Grab a fridge magnet. - Doesn’t stick or barely sticks → likely food-grade 304/316  - Strongly sticks → likely 430 or 200-series  Replace.

(Cold-worked 304 can be slightly magnetic, so weak attraction isn’t an automatic fail.)

2. **Check the bottom.** Flip the bowl. Look for **304, 18/8, 18/10, 316,** or **NSF 51** etched on the bottom. If it just says “stainless steel” or has nothing stamped — red flag. Real food-grade bowls advertise their grade.

3. **The chemical test (definitive).** A few drops of reagent on the bowl surface, wait two minutes: - Stays blue → food-grade 304/316 ✓ - Turns red, pink, or brown → not food-grade ✗

The kit: **304 Stainless Steel Test Solution** — about \$15, lasts for many tests, gives you a definitive answer. We didn't try it, but sharing in case you want to.

✓ **The Bowl We Recommend**

Americat Stainless Steel Cat Bowls — Set of 4

- ✓ Made in the USA from US-sourced steel
- ✓ 18/8 (304) stainless — the gold standard for food contact
- ✓ Independently lab-tested, certified free of lead, mercury, cadmium
- ✓ Human-grade, made in a facility that also makes medical and culinary products
- ✓ Wide and shallow (5.75" × 1.5") — designed to keep whiskers off the sides
- ✓ Heavy enough not to slide or tip
- ✓ Dishwasher safe, BPA-free
- ✓ Set of 4 — food + water for two cats, with backups in the dishwasher

A solid second choice: **Basis Pet Stainless Steel Cat Bowls** — also USA-made 304 steel, also third-party tested.

Bowl Shape — Whisker Stress Is Real

A cat's whiskers aren't just facial hair — they're wired right to her nervous system. They tell where the body is, where prey is, and what's right in front of her face.

In a deep, narrow bowl, the whiskers brush the sides **with every bite**. Over time, that creates sensory overload — sometimes called whisker fatigue. Signs:

- Scoops food out of the bowl with a paw before eating
- Pulls food onto the floor and eats it there
- Eats only the top layer and walks away
- Mealtime anxiety, eats fast and leaves unsatisfied

The fix: bowls wide enough that the whiskers never touch the sides. That's it.

Bowl care

- **Wash daily.** Wet food residue builds protein films and odor fast. Hand wash with warm water and unscented soap, or dishwasher.
- **Separate bowls for food and water**, and one set per cat to reduce competition stress.
- **Weekly deep clean:** soak in 1 part white vinegar to 3 parts hot water for 15 minutes, then rinse. Dissolves mineral deposits and biofilm.
- **Never bleach** — chlorine accelerates pitting in stainless steel. Vinegar works better.
- **Air dry upright** on a rack. Cloth towels transfer lint and bacteria.
- **Inspect under bright light.** Replace if you see pitting, rust, rainbow stains, or dull patches.
- **Keep food and water at least 10 feet from the litter box** — ideally a different room. Cats are wired not to eat near where they go.

Plants — Toxic vs. Safe

The list of plants toxic to cats is long. The highest-risk ones to keep out entirely:

Toxic — do not bring into your home:

- **Lilies** (all true lilies and daylilies — even the pollen, even the water in the vase. Acute kidney failure.)
- **Tulips, hyacinths, daffodils**
- **Sago palm** (extremely toxic)
- **Pothos, philodendron, monstera**
- **Dieffenbachia**
- **ZZ plant**
- **Oleander, azaleas, rhododendron**
- **Autumn crocus**
- **Aloe vera** (mildly toxic — watch for chewing)

Full canonical list: [ASPCA's Toxic and Non-Toxic Plant List](#).

Safe (many of these clean indoor air, too):

- Spider plant (great air purifier)
- Boston fern

- Parlor palm, ponytail palm, areca palm
- Calathea (prayer plant)
- African violet
- Christmas cactus
- Haworthia, Echeveria, other true succulents (skip jade)
- Hoya, peperomia
- Phalaenopsis orchids
- Air plants (Tillandsia)
- **Cat grass** (wheatgrass or oat grass) — actively encouraged. Safe outlet for chewing greens.



Shopping List

Get these set up *before* your kitten arrives. Walking into a fully prepared home is so much easier on everyone.

Food

- **Viva Raw** (raw, frozen — the most nutritionally complete brand we've found)
- **Sheba Kitten Pate** + **Sheba Cuts** (less processed, fewer fillers)
- **Stella & Chewy's freeze-dried raw** (great for travel and supplemental add ons)
- **Raw meaty bones** — chicken or Cornish hen necks, chicken wings (from a clean butcher or pet-grade raw supplier)
- **Taurine supplement** [tiniest sprinkle. Contents of one pill should last couple of weeks]
- **Kelp supplement** — dental health and breath

Bowls and water

- **Americat Stainless Steel Cat Bowls (Set of 4)** — 18/8 food-grade, USA-made, lab-tested, whisker-friendly

- **Stainless Steel Test Kit** — if you have bowls and want to verify
- **Cat water fountain**
- **Replacement filters** (clean weekly, change filters 1x month)

Litter

- **Purina Tidy Cats BREEZE Litter Box System** (zeolite pellets + pads)
- **Litter-Robot** (we use the largest model — cats avoid unclean surfaces)
- **Non-clumping paper pellet litter** alternative to Tidycat BREEZE

Play and enrichment

- **Wand toys** (ribbons, strings — not wire or plastic that sheds)
- **Spring toys**
- **Cardboard house scratchers and pads**
- **Cat play house** + toys (they love this!)
- **Vertical cat tree or wall shelves** — vertical territory matters
- **Window perch** for cat TV
- **Outdoor bird feeder** (fly through attracts the most birds)
- **Sticky mats or deterrent pads** for counters and furniture you want protected
- **Catio pod** (we use the octagon zip-top netted ones for supervised outdoor time)

Home environment

- **Non-toxic, fragrance-free cleaners** (or just white vinegar + baking soda + water — does almost everything)
- **Unscented trash bags**
- **Unscented laundry detergent**

Health and grooming

- **Nail clippers** (try two-person + **Churru treat** method)
- **A soft brush** (Birmans don't need much; Beans-coat kittens may need a bit more) [END OF PART 1 – Part 2 (Food & Water) coming next]

Chapter 02

Food & Water

What we feed Pouf & Beans, and why we made the choices we did.

Part 2 — Food & Water: The Longevity Engine

If you only read one part of this handbook, read this one.

Diet is the single biggest lever you have over your cat's lifespan, body composition, energy, coat, urinary health, kidney function, and mood. More than vaccines. More than vet visits. More than genetics.

The hard truth: most cats are quietly sick — chronically dehydrated, mildly inflamed, slowly developing kidney disease — because of what's in their bowl. The pet food industry is built around shelf stability and human convenience, not feline biology.


1. The Obligate Carnivore Truth

A cat is not a small dog. A cat is not an omnivore that “does well on” meat. A cat is an **obligate carnivore** — biologically required to get the bulk of their nutrients from animal tissue. There is no version of this where plants do the same job.

Four quick facts that change how you think about feeding:

- **They can't make taurine.** Humans and dogs synthesize their own from other amino acids. Cats can't. They have to eat it — and it's only in animal tissue.
- **They can't convert plant vitamin A.** Beta-carotene from carrots? Useless to a cat. They need preformed vitamin A from liver and organ meat.
- **They can't synthesize arginine.** A diet lacking it causes a toxic ammonia buildup within *hours*. Animal protein only.
- **They have almost no salivary amylase** — the enzyme that breaks down carbs. Their gut is short, acidic, and built to process meat fast.

Every “premium” kibble in the pet aisle is a workaround for these facts, not a fit with them.

 **The Science Behind It** Cats evolved as desert predators eating small mammals — mice, birds, lizards. Their entire physiology assumes high-moisture, high-protein, low-carbohydrate prey. Their gut is short and acidic because raw meat is the easiest thing in the world to digest. Feed them the opposite — dry, carb-heavy, plant-padded food — and every system works harder than it should. ([Feline Nutrition](#))

2. Why Kibble Fails Them

Kibble shouldn't be the main thing your cat eats. Not as a meal, not as a daily topper. (More on where it can fit in below.)

Dr. Lisa Pierson, the feline nutrition vet behind catinfo.org, names three core problems with kibble. We agree with all of them.

1. Not enough water. Kibble is 6-10% water. A mouse is 70-80%. Cats on dry food make urine roughly twice as concentrated as cats on wet food, and they don't drink enough to make up the gap — they're built to get water *from* their food. Their kidneys work overtime their whole lives. Chronic kidney disease kills about 1 in 3 senior cats. Urinary blockages trace back to the same root cause. ([Cornell Feline Health Center](#))

2. Too many carbs. Kibble has to contain starch — that's what holds the pellet together. Cats have no real use for 30-40% carbs. The excess drives obesity, diabetes, and gut inflammation. And “low-carb” kibble doesn't fix this. It's still dry, still over-cooked, still missing the point.

3. Wrong kind of protein. “Crude protein 32%” on the label means almost nothing if half of it is corn gluten, pea protein, or soy. Cats are built to use animal protein, not plant protein. Companies use plant protein because it's cheap. Grains in cat food serve the company's profit margin, not your cat's biology.

What else is in that bag


A few things most never hear about kibble:


- **Mold toxins.** Grains, especially corn, can carry fungal toxins. Cooking doesn't kill them. They build up in the liver over time and have caused deadly pet food recalls.
- **Bacterial contamination.** Kibble gets recalled for salmonella all the time. “Dry and shelf-stable” is a marketing line, not a guarantee.
- **Bugs and bug droppings.** Kibble sits in warehouses and pantries for months. Storage pests are common, and their droppings can trigger respiratory issues.

- **Additives and dyes.** BHA, BHT, ethoxyquin, food coloring. They make the food look good to *you*. None of it is necessary.
- **Cooking destroys nutrients.** High-heat processing kills up to 90% of taurine — the one amino acid cats can't make on their own. Manufacturers spray it back on after. Other nutrients get lost or changed in ways we don't fully understand.

The “dental health” claim is mostly marketing. Most cats swallow kibble whole or crunch it once. It doesn't clean teeth in any real way. Raw meaty bones do (covered later).

Where kibble can fit in. Used as an occasional supplement — not a meal — it's fine. Just know it's not really health-supporting. Beans loves her kibble, and she's nursing and skinny, so we leave a small bowl out overnight for calorie access while wet food would spoil. That's the only use case we have for it.

 **Don't Do This** Don't trust “prescription” or “veterinary diet” dry foods as a default. Many are still high-carb, low-moisture, and built on the same flawed formulation as supermarket kibble — they just cost more and come with a doctor's stamp. If your vet recommends one for a specific medical issue, ask what the wet-food equivalent is. There almost always is one.

 **Source** Dr. Lisa Pierson, DVM — *Feeding Your Cat: Know the Basics of Feline Nutrition* (catinfo.org). If you read one thing outside this handbook, read this PDF.

3. What to Feed Instead

The universal rule: whatever you feed, it has to be **complete and balanced for the right life stage** — kitten, adult, or all life stages. That label means the food meets minimum nutrient standards. Without it, you're guessing.

Feed kitten food for the entire first year

Kittens aren't tiny cats — they're growing animals. For the first 12 months they need more protein, more fat, more calcium, more taurine, and more calories per pound than an adult cat. Kitten food is built for that growth curve. Adult food won't kill them, but it'll leave gaps.

Larger and slow-maturing breeds need kitten food longer. **Maine Coons, Ragdolls, and Birman**s can need it for 18 months to 2+ years — Birman in particular are considered fully mature only around 2-3 years of age. When in doubt, stay on kitten food a little longer rather than switching too early.

Types of food

Raw. Closest to what a cat actually evolved to eat. Bone, organ, and muscle meat.


- **Viva Raw** — our top pick. Frozen, complete, properly balanced. The easiest way to feed raw without thinking about it.
- **DIY raw** — doable if you know what you're doing, but it's its own learning curve. Start with the basics from [Paws of Prey on YouTube](#) — the best free education we've found on raw feeding done right.

Freeze-dried raw. All the upside of raw without freezer space. Shelf-stable; you can rehydrate with water before serving.

- **Stella & Chewy's Dinner Morsels** — 98% meat, organs, and bone.

Wet food. Not all wet food is equal. Look for: named meat first ingredient (not “meat by-products”), no carrageenan, no wheat gluten, no seed oils, taurine listed.

- **Sheba kitten** — what we use. Convenient, palatable, decent ingredient list for a mass-market option.

 **Don't Do This** Don't assume premium pricing or a “raw-inspired” label means clean ingredients. **Stella & Chewy's Carnivore Cravings wet food** (their newer canned line) lists **sunflower oil** as the 5th ingredient. Sunflower oil is high in omega-6, which drives inflammation. Cats should get their fats from animal sources — chicken fat, fish oil, organ meat — not cheap seed oils. Read the label every time, even on brands you trust elsewhere.

Avoid:

- Anything with grain as a major ingredient
- “Gravy” formulas (loaded with thickeners and water — empty calories)
- Fish-heavy diets long-term (high phosphorus, mercury accumulation)
- Vegan or vegetarian cat food — there's no version of this that's safe

What you serve it in matters too

Food-grade stainless steel is best. We use the **Americat 4-bowl set** — U.S.-made, 18/8 304 stainless, independently lab-tested for lead, mercury, cadmium, and radioactivity. Wide, shallow, sloped to prevent whisker fatigue. Dishwasher safe.

Why this matters: plastic bowls leach chemicals, harbor bacteria in micro-scratches, and are a leading cause of feline chin acne. Ceramic can chip and some imported ceramic glazes contain lead. Cheap “stainless” is often not actually food-grade. (Full details and our magnet/chemical test method are covered in [Part 1 — Food & Water Bowls].)

⚡ Try This Tonight Pick up one can of your cat’s current food. Read the first five ingredients. If the first one isn’t a named meat (chicken, beef, turkey, rabbit — not “meat” or “poultry by-product meal”), or if you see wheat gluten, corn, carrageenan, or seed oils in the top five, swap that brand out of your rotation by next week.

A simple add-on: the egg yolk trick

Drop a raw egg yolk into your cat’s food a couple times a week. It’s one of the most nutrient-dense foods on the planet — sometimes called *nature’s multivitamin* — and it covers choline, B vitamins, healthy fats, and trace minerals that aren’t always abundant even in good cat food. Use pastured/organic eggs if you can.

Yolk only — no whites. Raw egg whites contain a protein called avidin that blocks biotin absorption. Long-term that means dull coat, skin issues, and metabolic problems. Cooking deactivates the avidin, so cooked whites are fine — but the easiest rule for raw feeders is *yolk yes, white no*.

4. Water: The Silent Crisis


Cats are bad at drinking. Not because they’re broken — because they’re built that way. Their wild ancestors got 70-80% of their water from prey. The thirst response only kicks in when they’re *already* mildly dehydrated. By the time your cat is at the water bowl, they’re behind.


This is why wet food matters so much. It’s also why the water you *do* offer needs to be set up to actually get used.

The setup that works

- **Multiple water sources.** At least 2-3 around the house. Cats won’t always travel for water, and they often won’t drink near their food (a wild instinct — prey near water can mean contamination).
- **Fountains beat bowls.** Running water is more enticing, more oxygenated, and stays fresher. We use a [stainless steel fountain](#) — same logic as bowls, no plastic against the water.

- **Stainless steel or ceramic only.** Plastic water bowls have the same chin-acne and bacteria problems as plastic food bowls.
- **Refresh daily.** Even fountains need cleaning weekly and water changes every 1-2 days. Standing water grows biofilm fast.
- **Filter your water.** Tap water is fine; filtered is better. The same chlorine, fluoride, and heavy metals you'd avoid for yourself aren't doing your cat any favors.

 **The Science Behind It** Cats descended from desert-dwelling African wildcats. Their kidneys evolved to concentrate urine to a degree no other domestic mammal matches — they can recover almost every drop of water from waste. The trade-off: they assume water comes from food, so their thirst drive is *weak* by design. On a dry diet, they live in a constant low-grade water deficit. Their kidneys compensate for years, then they don't.


 **Try This** Add a second water source in a different room and see if they use it.

5. Supplements That Earn Their Spot

Most cats on a varied, high-quality diet don't need a stack of supplements. A few specific ones are worth knowing about.

Taurine

Verify your food has it. Cats can't make taurine themselves, and deficiency is silent until it isn't — it causes heart failure and blindness. If you're feeding raw, freeze-dried raw, or quality wet food with named meat as the first ingredient, you're probably covered. Check the label.

 **The Science Behind It** Taurine is *extremely* heat-sensitive. Up to 90% of it can be destroyed during kibble manufacturing, which is why dry food has to add synthetic taurine back in after processing. Raw and gently cooked diets retain it naturally. A USDA review found that some “complete” canned diets still fell short of minimum taurine levels. ([USDA Taurine Report](#))


Kelp

For iodine, trace minerals, and dental health. Cats fed exclusively muscle meat can be low on iodine because most of it lives in thyroid tissue (which isn't in commercial raw blends). A pinch of kelp powder mixed into food a few times a week covers it.

Kelp also has a mild dental benefit — there's some evidence it helps reduce tartar buildup over time. Not a substitute for raw meaty bones, but a nice add.


Omega-3s (fish oil or krill oil)

For coat, skin, joints, and to balance out the omega-6 from any chicken/poultry-heavy diet. A few drops of a high-quality fish oil or **sardines or (in water, not oil)** a few times a week. Look for one that's third-party tested for heavy metals and rancidity — bad fish oil is worse than no fish oil.

 **The Science Behind It** Cats can't convert plant-based omega-3 (ALA from flax or chia) into the active forms (EPA and DHA) they actually need. Dogs can do this conversion poorly. Cats can barely do it at all. The omega-3 has to come from marine sources — fish oil, krill oil, or fish in the diet itself.

What to skip

- **Multivitamins for cats** — usually unnecessary if the diet is right, and the dosing on most of them is sloppy.
- **“Grain-free” treats** that swap grain for pea protein or tapioca. Same scam, different label.

 **Sources** Dr. Lisa Pierson — catinfo.org and [Feeding Your Cat PDF](#) · Cornell Feline Health Center — [Chronic Kidney Disease](#) · [Feline Nutrition](#) — [Why Cats Are Obligate Carnivores](#) · USDA AMS — [Taurine Report](#) · [Food Fur Life](#) — [Egg yolk as nature's multivitamin](#) · [Paws of Prey](#) — [YouTube](#) · [Americat bowls](#) · [Viva Raw](#) · [Stella & Chewy's](#)

Chapter 03

Litter

The smell-free, clay-free system we settled on after trying everything.

Part 3 — Litter: What We've Tried and Where We Landed

Litter is one of those things that seems simple until you actually live with it. We've been through a few setups. Here's where we are now, what we've learned along the way, and the trade-offs we noticed — so you can make your own call.

1. 🐾 Our Journey So Far

Where we started: clumping clay + a big litter box.

For a while we used standard clumping clay litter in a big oversized box. It actually works really well in a Litter-Robot — clumps fast, scoops cleanly, the machine loves it. Super convenient.

What we didn't love over time:

- It's **smelly**. Even with daily cycling, the ammonia builds up faster than expected.
- It **kicks up dust** every time they dig. You can see it in a beam of sunlight near the box.
- It's **messy**. Tracking everywhere, paws white with clay dust, fine grit on the floor around the box for five feet.


Where we are now: trying the BREEZE system (zeolite pellets).

We swapped to the **Purina Tidy Cats BREEZE Litter Box System** — small zeolite pellets sit on a grate on top, and an absorbent pad sits below. Solids stay on the pellets, urine drops through to the pad.

What we're noticing so far:

- **Very little smell, sometimes none.** The poop dries out fast sitting on top of dry pellets instead of getting wrapped in moist clumps.
- **Easy daily cleanup** — scoop the solids off the top, that's it. The pad gets changed about once a week.
- **Zero dust.** The pellets are too big to aerosolize.
- **Way less tracking.** The pellets are big enough that they mostly stay in the box, and what does get kicked out is easy to drop back in.

Still some daily maintenance — we scoop solids every day, that part doesn't go away. But the daily experience is noticeably cleaner.

 **The Science Behind It** Zeolite is a naturally porous volcanic mineral with a crystalline structure that traps ammonia molecules on contact. That's why the BREEZE system stays low-odor even between pad changes — the pellets aren't just letting urine pass through, they're actually grabbing the ammonia out of the air around the box. Different mechanism than clumping clay, which just absorbs moisture.

What we'd do differently with kittens

A few things worth knowing when you're bringing a kitten home:

- **Clumping litter can be harmful to kittens.** Most use sodium bentonite, a clay that expands up to 15x when it gets wet. That's what makes the clumps. If a kitten swallows a meaningful amount (and they do — they groom paws, fall into the box, sometimes just taste it), it can swell in the stomach. [ASPCA and most vet sources](#) recommend skipping clumping clay until kittens are past 6 months old.
- **Pellet-based litter (BREEZE, pine, paper) avoids this entirely.** Pieces are too big to ingest, and even if they're chewed they don't expand.
- That's part of why started the kittens on BREEZE —honestly, with how clean it's been so far, we may just stay there.

2. The Litter-Robot Question

We have a **Whisker Litter-Robot (latest version, 4)** and it's been great for adult cats. Worth mentioning a few things upfront for the kitten phase:

- **Kittens need to be at least 3 lbs (1.36 kg)** to safely trigger the weight sensor in automatic mode. ([Litter-Robot 4 manual](#))
- Under that weight, **run it in semi-automatic mode** — leave it powered off, and start a manual clean cycle yourself after they use it. This lets them get used to the dome and the smell without any chance of it cycling while they're tiny enough to be inside it.
- **Requires clumping litter** — only uses clumping clay litter. A no go for kittens.

We aren't planning to allow the kittens to use the Litter-Robot until they're well past 6 months and steady around the box. Even then, we keep a BREEZE box available too.

⚠️ **Skip Scented Litter** Cats have a sense of smell roughly 14x more sensitive than ours. Cats will avoid a box if the fragrance is too much or deal with it and suffer potential health issues down the road.

4. 🏠 **Box Setup: The Stuff That Actually Matters**

This part doesn't depend on which litter you use — these are the rules that have worked for us regardless of system.

N+1 rule. Number of boxes = number of cats + 1. Two cats → three boxes. Resource scarcity is one of the most common reasons cats pee outside the box. Definitely true if you have a multiple level home. Cats need bathrooms upstairs/downstairs just like us.

Quiet but not isolated. Cats are vulnerable when they pee — they want privacy *and* an escape route. A laundry-room corner with one exit can feel like a trap. A spare room or quiet hallway with sight lines works better.

Big enough. The box should be at least 1.5x the cat's length, nose to tail base. Most store-bought boxes are too small for an adult Birman.

Open beats covered for most cats. Covered boxes trap odor right at face level when they're inside. The Litter-Robot is technically covered, but it self-cleans, which is the trade-off that makes it work.

At least 10 feet from food and water. Same rule as Part 2 — cats won't eat near where they eliminate.


One box per floor. Especially as they age. A 12-year-old cat shouldn't have to run downstairs at 3 a.m.

🧬 **The Science Behind It** Cats evolved as solitary desert predators. Burying waste hid their scent from larger predators and kept them from alerting prey. That instinct is still online in your indoor cat — a dirty box, a smelly box, or a box in a vulnerable spot reads as *unsafe*, and they will find somewhere else. Most “litter box problems” are setup problems the cat is trying to tell you about.

5. 🧼 **Cleaning Routine**

What we actually do:

- **Daily scoop or cycle.** Twice a day is even better. The Litter-Robot handles this automatically; the BREEZE box gets a quick scoop of solids into a ziplock bag.
- **Pad change weekly** for the BREEZE (or sooner if it smells).
- **Deep clean every couple months.** Empty the whole box, wash with hot water and unscented dish soap or white vinegar. Skip bleach — it can react with urine ammonia and the residual smell turns cats off.
- **Replace plastic boxes every 1-2 years.** Micro-scratches hold bacteria and odor no matter how well you clean. If the box smells even after washing, it's time.
- **Wash hands after scooping.** Toxoplasmosis is real, especially if you're pregnant or immunocompromised. Indoor-only cats fed clean food are very low risk, but the habit is worth keeping.


 **Try This Tonight** Set a daily phone reminder to scoop or cycle the box at the same time every day — ideally right before you feed them. A clean box right before a meal lines up with the natural rhythm cats live by: eliminate, eat, groom, sleep.

6. What the Litter Box Tells You

Their bathroom is one of the best diagnostic tools you have. Worth a glance every day.

Check for:

- **Volume of urine** — a sudden drop or large urine clumps can flag kidney issues or diabetes
- **Frequency** — straining or repeated trips with little output is a urinary blockage warning
- **Color** — pink or red = blood = vet visit
- **Stool consistency** — chronic soft stool points to food intolerance, parasites, or gut inflammation


 **Quick Action — Male Urinary Blockage** If a male cat is repeatedly squatting with little or no urine coming out, crying, or licking his genitals obsessively — **this is an emergency**. Male cats can develop life-threatening urethral blockages within hours. Go to the emergency vet right away. Don't wait until morning.

7. The First Week With a New Kitten

The good news: kittens are litter trained and they picked it up pretty quickly.

A few things to make the first week smooth:

- **Show them the box(es)** when they arrive. Set them in it gently, let them sniff and help them practice digging with their paws.
- **Put a box near where they sleep** for the first week. Tiny bladders, short legs.
- **Don't change the litter type** for the first 2-3 weeks. They're already adjusting to a new home —try Tidycat BREEZE zeolite pellets or paper pellets. Switch slowly after they're settled.
- **If accidents happen**, don't scold. Clean with an **enzyme cleaner** (**Nature's Miracle** is the best!) — not an ammonia-based cleaner, which smells like urine to a cat and tells them this spot is the bathroom. Then re-show them the box. Place the box where the accident happened so they know they should use that instead.

 **Litter Box Issues** *Peeing on the rug isn't "bad" behavior. They're still toddlers, or as adults, they could be in pain, stressed, or letting you know the setup isn't working for them. Cats don't just try to be mean for no reason. They're trying to communicate something's wrong.*

 **Sources & Links** [BREEZE System \(Amazon\)](#) · [Litter-Robot 4 Manual](#) · [Catwatch — Clumping litter & cats](#) · [Cornell Feline Health Center](#) · [ASPCA Poisons](#)

Chapter 04

Health & Vet Care

How to keep them well, and what to watch for if something feels off.

Part 4 — Health: What We've Learned

Most of what we know about cat health, we learned by asking *why* more than once. Why this vaccine? Why this schedule? What is the actual risk? The answers were rarely as settled as we expected, and the rabbit holes were worth going down.

This is the long part. Here's what we've landed on so far, what changed our minds, and how we make these calls with our own kittens.

1. Vaccines: What Kittens Actually Need

Why we don't vaccinate:

Not recommended by our breeder. Our Birman breeder specifically told us that “Birmans don't do well with vaccines.” Essentially saying that they fall victim to more issues and adverse reactions than other breeds.

Adverse Reactions are Real.

General sources

https://kittyhealth.info/vaccination_for_cats.html

3. Spay & Neuter: When (and Why We Wait)

This is one of the places where we diverged most from mainstream advice, and where the breed actually matters a lot.

The standard recommendation in the U.S. is to spay or neuter by 5-6 months — oftentimes earlier in shelters. The reasoning is population control plus convenience: it's easier, faster, and cheaper to fix a smaller animal.

Here's what changed our minds:


Sex hormones do real developmental work. They're not just about reproduction — they help shape bone density, joint development, body composition, and behavioral maturity. Removing them before a cat is physically done growing means that work doesn't fully happen. Recent studies suggest cats neutered later (closer to 7-12 months) tend to have better long-term body condition than those done very early. ([Veterinary Record 2025](#))


Birmans (and other slow-maturing breeds) take longer than the average cat to finish growing. Most cats are physically mature by 12-18 months. Birmans aren't fully mature until **2-3 years of age**. Their bones, joints, and frame are still developing well past the point a standard schedule would have them spayed or neutered. Maine Coons and Ragdolls are similar — large, slow, late-maturing breeds.

Where we land

For our kittens, we recommend **delaying spay/neuter to between 6 and 11 months** at the earliest, and often longer for Birman-leaning kittens:

- **Females:** before the first heat if possible (heat brings risks — mammary tumors over time, pyometra later in life). Most cats have their first heat around 5-6 months, but Birmans can be later. We aim for 6+ months for females.
- **Males:** around 9-12 months. Slower-maturing males can wait longer if they're not spraying or showing other behavioral signs. The longer they have their hormones during skeletal development, the better-built they end up.

 **The Science Behind It** Sex hormones cue the growth plates in long bones to close at the right time. When a cat is neutered very early, those growth plates stay open longer, and the cat often ends up taller and leaner than they were genetically meant to be. That's not necessarily a problem — but combined with reduced muscle mass from low testosterone, it can change body composition and joint mechanics. There's growing evidence this trade-off matters more in large and slow-maturing breeds. ([Today's Veterinary Practice — Optimal Spay/Neuter Age](#))

 **Don't Do This** Don't accept a hard 5-month deadline from your vet without a conversation about your cat's breed and development. If you're told it has to happen at 5 months, ask *why* in your cat's specific case. The science doesn't support a one-size-fits-all cutoff, especially for slow-maturing breeds.

A note on the trade-offs: delaying does mean managing a cat or an unneutered male in your home for a few extra months. Female cats in heat are *loud* and *clingy*. Unneutered males can spray. For us, the long-term skeletal and behavioral benefits are worth the few months of inconvenience — but you should know what you're signing up for.

4. Parasites: Indoor Cats Still Need This

A common misconception: indoor cats don't get parasites. They do. Just less often, and via different routes.

Indoor cats can pick up parasites from:

- **Insects** that come inside (fleas hitchhike on you, mosquitoes can carry heartworm)
- **Plants and soil** you bring in
- **Other pets** in and out of the house
- **Your shoes and clothes** (roundworm and hookworm eggs travel on dirt)
- **Mom-to-kitten transmission** —kittens can get parasites if the queen passes them on during pregnancy and nursing.

Where we land

We were also told that anti parasitics can be harmful to kittens and cats in general (also from our Breeder). That's part of the reason why we keep them indoors to prevent fleas and parasites where we can) and keep our environment clean so that we don't have to expose them to toxic solutions.

5. Vet Visits

Did you know? **Private equity firms and mega-corporations now control between 25% and 50% of all veterinary clinics in the U.S.**, a significant increase from less than 10% a decade ago. This consolidation is most pronounced in the specialty sector, where corporate entities own approximately **75%** of specialty and emergency clinics.

What does this mean – now many clinics are moving toward a profit over providing quality care.

You might be surprised to know that regular vet visits have been associated with higher pet mortality. Source:

Here are some leaders we follow

[Dr. Judy](#)

Baseline bloodwork at the first adult exam

Some recommend getting a full blood panel (CBC, chemistry, T4 thyroid) somewhere between 1-2 years old. This isn't because we expect to find something — it's so you have a **healthy-cat baseline** to compare against later. A creatinine that drifts from 1.4 to 1.9 over five years is a much earlier kidney warning than a single 1.9 with nothing to compare it to.

Find a vet you actually trust

This matters more than which clinic is closest. A good cat vet:


- Doesn't push every product on every visit
- Welcomes questions and second opinions


If your current vet bristles at the questions in this handbook, that's information. You're looking for a partner, not an authority.

6. 🚗 Stress-Free Vet Visits

Most vet visits are stressful for cats because of *how they get there*, not what happens once they arrive. The way we handle this changes the whole experience.

- **Leave the carrier out occasionally.** Not as something they only see before vet trips. Make it part of the furniture — soft bed inside, treats occasionally tossed in, the door left open. They sleep in it. It becomes neutral.
- **Hard-sided top-loading carriers** with a removable top are dramatically less stressful than the standard front-door carrier. Many cat-friendly vets will examine your cat *in the bottom half of the carrier* with the top removed, so the cat never has to be pulled out of their safe space. Worth every penny.
- **Practice drives.** Don't make the first vet visit the first time they experience a car (way too much at once). Be sure to take time to show them your garage, experience going outside, riding in the car on short drives so they know it's ok and usually accompanied by treats.
- **Don't feed for a few hours before the visit.** Motion sickness is real. Plus, a slightly hungry cat is much more receptive to treats at the clinic.
- **Car travel.** Being trapped inside a small box without any control or knowing what's happening can be stressful. We find our cats do much better if the passenger holds them and they can see.
- **Cover the carrier with a towel** in the car. Visual blackout can reduce panic once they are settled.
- **Gentle transitions.** Being carried in a carrier, riding in a bumpy car without a seatbelt, with all the new noises and sounds at the vet can be scary. Pause and transition slowly into new environments so they can adjust. Drive gently, and speak softly to help them feel safe.
- **Optional: Feliway or calming pheromone spray** on the carrier 15-20 minutes before. Not magic, but it takes the edge off for some cats.

 **The Why** *A cat at the vet isn't being dramatic. They're a small prey animal who's been pulled out of their territory, put in a moving metal box, and surrounded by the smells of dogs, sick animals, and strangers. Everything we do to make that experience less terrifying — predictable carrier, familiar smells, gentle handling — pays off in a cat that lets us care for them across a 20-year lifespan.*

 **Sources & Links**

Chapter 05

Bonding & Connection

The small daily rituals that turn a kitten into family.

Play matters. So does food, sleep, and a clean home. But the day-to-day bond between you and your cat is built mostly through smaller rituals — short, intentional moments that compound over years. None of these are in standard cat care guides. All of them work.


1. Show Them the World


Pick your kitten up daily and carry them around the house. Walk slowly. Talk as you go. Show them things they haven't seen.


“This is the bathroom. That’s the window we open in the morning so you can watch the birds...”

Carry them up on your chest or in the crook of your neck, with one hand cupping their belly and back feet so they feel secure being held by you. When they have no support, they get nervous. When you cradle their feet, they are held. Over time they start to recognize your heartbeat against theirs — and they learn to trust you through these calm, shared experiences.

Another favorite of ours is the **forearm carry** — great for one-handed walks around the house. Bend your elbow and lay your kitten parallel along your forearm, with the front of their body near the crook of your elbow and their belly resting on your arm. One front leg sits against your stomach, the other dangles outside your arm. Cup their back feet with your hand so they feel stable. This frees your other hand to gently pet them, scratch their cheeks, and handle their paws and ears as you walk them around. It’s our favorite carry for getting them used to being touched — the walking and the petting distract them enough that the handling never registers as a *thing*.

 **The Science Behind It** Cats spend their whole lives at ground level. Being carried gives them a totally different angle on their home — they’re seeing what you see. It’s also a shared experience, and it positions you as a guide, not just the food person. Direct contact with your heartbeat also regulates their nervous system the same way it does for a human infant.

 **The Science Behind It** The forearm carry is desensitization done the soft way. When pleasant input (movement, your voice, gentle pets) happens at the same time as something they’d normally be unsure about (paw handling, ear touches), the nervous system files the touch as safe. It’s the same principle vets and groomers wish every owner used — you’re just building it into a daily walk instead of a training session.


 **Try This Tonight** Pick up your kitten, support their back feet, and walk them slowly through one room. Narrate what you see. Five minutes.


2. Talk to Them Like Family

Talk to your cat throughout the day. Not actual back-and-forth conversations (that's how you become the crazy cat lady) — just narrating, greeting, and including them in the texture of daily life.

A few habits we've built:

- **Acknowledge them and their experience** — better than ignoring them when they come to greet you. Leave for small trips before longer time away so they trust you didn't die 😊 and trust you're coming back.
- **Cooking together** — pull a barstool near the kitchen and narrate what you're doing. No counter access (litter paws + food prep don't mix), but they get to be present.
- **Showing them inside the fridge** — sounds odd, they love it. Another way to add variety and new experiences.
- **Including them when guests are over** — introduce them if they come to greet the guests. Let them be part of the room rather than ignored furniture.

 **The Science Behind It** Cats learn a lot of our language — not the literal words, but the rhythms, moods, and patterns. Studies on cat-directed speech show cats actually pay closer attention when humans talk to them in a high, sing-song voice meant specifically for them.

 **Did You Know?** Adult cats only meow at humans, almost never at each other. Meowing is a language they developed *specifically* to communicate with us. If they're meowing, they're trying to tell you something.


3. Loving Affirmations


This one will sound out there to some readers. We've used it long enough to be confident it works.


We've worked with shelter cats, feral colonies, and animals written off as unsocializable. Soft, intentional affirmations have been the most effective tool we've found to rebuild trust. The phrases we repeat:

- "I got you. You're safe."
- "I'm so proud of you."
- "You're so brave."
- "You're so fierce."
- "I love you. I'm not going anywhere."

It's not really about the words. It's about the state you're in when you say them.

 **The Science Behind It** Cats track your breath, tone, posture, and energy more closely than they track your words. When you slow down and speak with calm love, your nervous system shifts — and theirs picks up on it. They're not hearing the words; they're feeling the state behind them. The words just keep you in that state long enough for them to land.

 **The Why Underneath** Affirmations aren't a spell you cast on the cat. They're a way of regulating yourself — and your kitten mirrors whatever state you're in. Calm is contagious.

 **Try This Tonight** Sit near your kitten when they're calm. Lower your voice. Share a few affirmations directly to them. Watch what happens to their eyes, ears, and breathing.

4. The Emotion Code — Releasing What They Carry

If you've made it this far, you're ready for this one. It sits at the edge of what most cat care guides will tell you, but it's been one of the most powerful tools in our toolkit — both with humans (one of us is a certified Emotion Code practitioner with seven years of experience) and with the foster and traumatized animals we've worked alongside over the years.

The premise. Animals carry trapped emotions — their own, inherited from their lineage, and sometimes absorbed from the humans and animals around them. These trapped emotions can show up as behavior issues, appetite loss, anxiety, aggression, withdrawal, even physical

symptoms. The Emotion Code, developed by **Dr. Bradley Nelson**, is a method for identifying and releasing those trapped emotions. It's quick, gentle, and non-invasive.

We're not going to teach the full method here — that's what **Dr. Nelson's book** is for. What we want to do is raise awareness that this tool exists, because most cat owners go their whole lives never knowing.


Beans, six weeks postpartum

The most recent example: a couple months after Beans had the kittens, she stopped eating. Not all at once — she'd just lost interest in food. Wet food, raw, treats, the things that used to make her run. She got skinny enough that we could feel her backbone. We tried new foods, new bowls, more variety. Nothing landed.

So one afternoon I sat with her and ran a session. Within a few hours that same day, she was eating again.

The emotions that came up for her: **disgust** (we'd recently tried a new food she clearly hated, and it was carrying over), **feeling taken for granted** (which — fair, she'd been nursing and grooming six kittens around the clock for two months), and a few others she'd been carrying that she'd absorbed from others in the home.

She's been eating normally ever since.


 **Pouf & Beans IRL** I don't usually share what comes up in my sessions — it's private, the same way it would be with a human client. But Beans is family, and her story is one of the clearest examples I have of how fast this can work when nothing else has. She went from skinny and uninterested to back at her bowl in the same afternoon.


How it works (as best we understand it)

Honestly? We're not entirely sure. Neither is Dr. Nelson — he's said as much. What we *do* know, from seven years of practice with humans and animals, is that it works consistently and immediately. The mechanism we think is closest:

- Every emotion is energy with a frequency
- Strong emotions that aren't fully processed can get “trapped” — stuck in the body as a kind of energetic residue
- These trapped emotions distort the body's natural electromagnetic field and can cause downstream physical and behavioral symptoms

- The practitioner uses muscle testing (a form of biofeedback) to identify which emotions are trapped, then releases them by running a magnet along the governing meridian of the body
- The animal doesn't need to do anything. They don't even need to be in the room.


 **The Science Behind It** Emerging research on **biofield therapies** — therapeutic touch, energy psychology, intention-based healing — is starting to validate what practitioners have observed for decades: humans and animals respond to focused intention and energetic work in measurable ways (heart rate, cortisol, behavior). The mechanism is still debated, but the outcomes are increasingly hard to dismiss. The NIH's National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health has been funding studies in this space for years. ([NIH NCCIH](#))

 **The Why Underneath** *If you've ever felt the room shift when an angry person walks in, or felt instantly calmer near someone grounded, you already know cats live in that world all the time. They're tiny, sensitive, and tuned to the energy around them. They absorb what we don't release. They carry what their lineage didn't get to process. Sometimes the kindest thing we can do is help them put it down.*

Where to learn more

Two paths from here — both work:

1. **Find a certified practitioner.** Most Emotion Code practitioners offer animal sessions remotely. You don't need to be in the same room, or even the same country. The official directory is at [Discover Healing](#).
2. **Read the book and teach yourself.** Honestly, the process isn't hard. [The Emotion Code](#) walks you through everything — the chart of emotions, the muscle testing, the release. Quick read, accessible, doesn't require a science background. If you've ever wanted a hands-on way to support your cat (and yourself) at this layer, this is the doorway.

 **Try This (When You're Ready)** If something's off with your cat — appetite, behavior, mood — and your vet has ruled out medical issues, book a session with a certified practitioner or pick up the book and try it yourself. Not a replacement for veterinary care. A different layer of the same picture.

5. 🙌 Petting & Touch

How you touch your cat — and *how often* — is one of the biggest signals you send them about safety and connection. The kittens we've raised get touched constantly from the day they can be held, and it pays off for life: they trust hands, they trust being picked up, and nail trims and vet exams become non-events.

Greet first, pet second

Before going in to pet your cat, be polite and *greet them first*. Offer a low open hand or a finger so they can smell you. If they lean in, head-bump it, or stay calm — you're cleared. Now go in with a gentle rub.

This tiny ritual matters more than people realize. It's how cats greet each other. Skip it and you're the human who looms and grabs. Do it consistently and you become the person who *asks first* — which builds a completely different kind of relationship.

Touches that soothe

Once they're calm and you're connected, a few touches we've found especially soothing:


- **The love-bite pinch.** Lightly pinch the loose skin and hair at the back of their neck with your fingernails (the nails make it feel sharp, not painful). It mimics the love-bites their mother used to give them and can be deeply soothing. Use this when they're already relaxed or in your arms — not as a way to grab them.
- **Booty taps.** Light tapping just above the hips. Many cats love this. Some find it over-stimulating, so watch their tail and ears — if the tail thrashes or the ears flatten, ease off.
- **The big “mama” pet.** Slow, firm pets that cover the whole face, head, and ears with your full hand. This mimics how mama cats groom their kittens with broad licks. Grounding, not stimulating — great for winding down.


Daily handling for vet-readiness

Daily, casually, without making it a *thing*:

- **Hold them belly-up** in your arms. The most vulnerable position a cat can be in. The more often they're held this way calmly, the more they learn it's safe.
- **Touch their paws** — gently squeeze each toe pad.
- **Touch their ears, gums, and tail.** Every part of their body should be familiar with your hands.
- **Lift them, hold them close, set them down on different surfaces, roll them gently from side to side.**

- **Kiss them** on the head and between the ears.

 **The Science Behind It** The scruff-pinch and broad face-pets work because they tap into reflexes a kitten learned in their first weeks with their mother. Scruff handling activates a built-in calming response — it's why kittens go limp when their mom carries them. Broad pets across the head activate the scent glands on their cheeks and forehead, the same ones they use to mark you when they feel safe and bonded.

 **The Science Behind It** Kisses on the head mimic head-bonking and mutual grooming — how cats say *we're family*. They learn the gesture quickly and offer it back. Touching paws, ears, and tail regularly also desensitizes those zones, so when a vet or groomer handles them later, it doesn't register as a threat.


6. **Wear Them — The Sling Trick**


One of the most effective bonding tools we've found: **wear your kitten on your body**.

Two options while they're still small:

- **A microfiber hair towel** with a button closure. Sling it around your neck so the “head pouch” hangs at your chest. Tuck the kitten inside.
- **A baby wrap sling** — wrap them against your chest the way you would a newborn.

It looks ridiculous. It works.


 **The Science Behind It** Skin-to-skin contact regulates a mammal's nervous system the same way it does a human baby's. Your heartbeat acts as a metronome for theirs. They get hours of continuous exposure to your scent and your steady rhythm — and they learn you're safe at a level deeper than play or food can reach.


 **Try This Tonight** Wrap your kitten against your chest in a soft cloth — front side, so they're touching your skin or shirt right over your heart. Go about your evening. Cook dinner, fold laundry, water plants. The skin contact and direct access to your heartbeat is what makes this work — make it ordinary, not a special event.

7. 🌙 Sleep Bonding

Sleeping near each other is one of the strongest bonding signals between cats — and between cats and humans. If your kitten wants to sleep in the bed with you, let them. If they're too small, or you want them to have their own space at first:

- **A small woven basket** near your bed with a soft blanket
- **A blanket wrapped in a loose circle** on the floor next to you — cats love enclosed, nest-shaped sleeping spots
- **Close enough that they can see and smell you** through the night

 **The Science Behind It** Sleeping in proximity to a trusted human syncs your nervous systems. Their heart rate, breathing, and stress hormones drop when yours do. They sleep more deeply when you're nearby — and so do you.


 **Did You Know?** Cats sleep 12–16 hours a day, and most of that is light sleep where they're still tracking the room. When they choose to deep-sleep next to you — paws curled, breathing slow, ear not twitching at every sound — that's trust at its highest level.

Sleep sounds

Sound shapes sleep — yours and theirs. We play soothing music at every sleep cycle: a deep sleep playlist during their daytime naps, and a long Tibetan monk Ohm chanting album at night. The kittens love the Ohm — when it comes on, everyone soon passes out.

Birmans are the *Sacred Cats of Burma* — the legend goes that they were the temple companions of Tibetan-Burmese monks, sitting beside them in meditation. True or not, all our babies love it.

- **Our favorite** — [Tibetan Monk Ohm Chanting](#) (the album with the monk in meditation on the cover, ~3 hours long)
- **For naps** — [Deep Sleep playlist](#) on Spotify

 **The Science Behind It** Cats hear roughly three times the frequency range humans do, which means they're constantly filtering more sound than we are. Slow, sustained tones — chanting, low drones, deep ambient — give their auditory system something steady to settle into instead of unpredictable household noises that keep them in light, tracking-the-room sleep.

8. Listening Back — How They Talk to You

Section 2 was about talking to them. This one is about listening. Cats are communicating constantly — most of it just isn't with their voice.

The more you watch, the more obvious it becomes that almost nothing they do is random. A flick of the tail, the angle of an ear, the way they blink at you across the room — it's all language. Once you learn it, you stop missing what they're saying.

Tail

- **Straight up, tip curled.** Happy to see you, or *“I’m generally happy / enjoying this.”*
- **Question-mark curve.** Friendly, curious, “what’s up?”
- **Puffed out.** Scared or startled — they’re trying to look bigger.
- **Low and tucked.** Anxious, submissive, unsure.
- **Thrashing or thumping.** Over-stimulated or annoyed. Stop petting and give them space.
- **Slow swish.** Focused on something (usually prey, real or imagined).

Ears

- **Forward.** Interested, alert, engaged.
- **Sideways (“airplane ears”).** Conflicted or uncertain.
- **Flat back against the head.** Fear or aggression. Back off.

Eyes


- **Slow blink.** Cat kisses. The biggest compliment they can give you. Slow blink back.
- **Wide pupils, hard stare.** Aroused — could be play, could be threat. Read the rest of the body.
- **Half-closed, soft.** Deeply content. They feel safe with you.


The whole body

- **Loaf** (paws tucked under). Relaxed but ready. Casually monitoring the room.
- **Belly exposed.** *Not* an invitation to rub the belly. It's vulnerability — a sign of trust. Most cats will scratch you if you take it as a request.
- **Elevator butt** (raised hindquarters when you scratch their lower back). They're enjoying it. Keep going.
- **Kneading** ("making biscuits"). A leftover from nursing — pure contentment. They're regressing in the best way.
- **Headbutting / bunting.** Marking you with their facial scent glands. *You are mine and I love you.*

Vocal range

- **Chirps and trills.** Friendly greeting. Mother cats use this to call kittens.
- **Short meow.** Hello.
- **Long meow.** "Listen to me, I need something."
- **Purring.** Usually contentment, sometimes self-soothing when in pain or stressed. Read the context.
- **Yowling.** Discomfort, mating call, or cognitive issues in older cats. Worth paying attention to.
- **Hissing or growling.** Back off. They're communicating clearly.

 **The Science Behind It** Cats developed meowing almost exclusively to communicate with humans. Feral and wild cats are largely silent with each other once weaned. Domestic cats meow because *we respond*. It's a learned behavior — and over time, individual cats develop a unique vocabulary with their specific human. Your cat is literally inventing a language for you.

 **Try This Tonight** Catch your kitten's eye from across the room and slow-blink at them. Hold it for two or three seconds. If they slow-blink back, you've just had a conversation.

9. The Socialization Window — The First 16 Weeks


There's a stretch of a kitten's life — roughly **2 to 7 weeks of age**, with diminishing plasticity through about **16 weeks** — when their brain is deciding what's normal forever. Sounds, smells, surfaces, people, animals: whatever they're exposed to during this window gets filed as *safe*. Whatever they miss gets filed as *unknown* — and unknown reads as *threat* to a cat for the rest of their life.


This is why some adult cats are bombproof and some hide from the doorbell at 12 years old. It's almost always the window.


What we exposed our kittens to

A working list of what we put them through, on purpose, during the window:

- **Hands.** Constant, gentle handling from day one. Every part of their body. Multiple humans.
- **Sounds.** Vacuum, kitchen fans, blender, hair dryer, doorbell, music, TV, dishes clanging. Casually, not all at once.
- **Smells.** Cooking, cleaning products (the safe ones), other animals on our clothes, outdoor air.
- **Textures.** Carpet, tile, hardwood, blanket, towel, basket, sink, tub, car seat.
- **New humans.** Friends, family, delivery folks. Calm introductions, treats nearby.
- **Being picked up and carried** by multiple people, in multiple ways.
- **Being held belly-up** and having paws, ears, gums, and tail touched.

 **Pouf & Beans IRL** What we haven't done yet: **brought them into cars.** We've done so much desensitization at home that the kittens are bombproof indoors — but the carrier and a car ride are still a brand-new context that we'll work on before they go home with their families.

 **The Science Behind It** A kitten's brain produces enormous amounts of new neural connections during the socialization window, then aggressively prunes the ones it didn't use. What's "familiar" gets reinforced. What's "novel" later in life never gets the same calm-circuit wiring. This is why feral kittens caught after 8–10 weeks rarely become fully relaxed house cats no matter how much love they get — the window has closed. ([American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior — Position Statement on Puppy Socialization, applies to kittens too](#))

 **Try This This Week** Pick one new sound, one new texture, and one new room. Introduce your kitten to all three this week. Casually, with you nearby. Add to the list as you go.

10. 🐱 Cat-to-Cat Introductions — How to Do It Right

Most multi-cat households start badly. The new cat shows up, the resident cat sees a stranger in their territory, and the first impression is *threat*. From there, every interaction is filtered through fear, and the relationship can take months — sometimes years — to repair. Sometimes never.

The good news: if you do this slowly, it works almost every time.

How we did it with Pouf and Beans

They came to us at 3–4 months old, around the same time, but from different homes. Here's the rough timeline we ran:


Days 1–3 — Separate rooms, scent only. Set the new kitten up in a quiet room with their own food, water, litter, bed, and toys. Keep the door shut. The two cats know about each other only through sound and scent under the door.


Days 3–5 — Scent swap + paws-under-the-door play. Take a soft cloth and rub it gently on one cat's cheeks (their facial scent glands). Place it where the other cat sleeps. Swap their blankets. Let them sleep on each other's smells. *Then start playing under the door crack* — a wand toy or a wiggling string from one side, the other cat batting at it from the other. Mix the scent work with food, treats, play, and affection on both sides so the other cat starts to mean *good things are happening*.

Days 5–7 — Sight on their terms. After a few days of pawing under the door and clearly enjoying it, crack the door slightly — just enough for glimpses. They'll want more, but keep it small and let them work up to it. Feed them on either side of the cracked door at the same time. Then try walking around the house with one cat in your arms so the other can observe them moving without being approached — *on their terms, not backed into a space*. If there's no hissing and things feel comfortable and fun, start opening the door wider. Go slow. If hissing happens, back off and start again until it's fun.

Days 7–10 — Supervised play together. Open the door for short sessions — 10–20 minutes — with you always present at first. Use their favorite wand toy and have them both chase it together. The trick: a moving toy gives them something *other than each other* to focus on, so they can be in the same room without the other cat being the focus. They'll still be aware of each other, but it won't feel like a confrontation. Then start giving them treats together, feeding them together, and keep playing together. End sessions before either cat gets stressed.

Day 10+ — Free roaming. By now they should have had plenty of play sessions where they're hanging out together without you actively managing the room. Sleeping, eating, exploring on their own. Eventually they'll start grooming each other. *That's how they say I love you.*

 **The Science Behind It** Cats are *territorial*, not social by default. In the wild, a new cat in another cat's territory means competition for food, shelter, and mates — i.e., a survival threat. The slow-intro protocol works because it lets the resident cat's nervous system update its threat assessment *before* a face-to-face meeting. By the time they meet, the new cat is already a known scent associated with food and calm — not a stranger to defend against.

 **Pouf & Beans IRL** Pouf and Beans bonded fast — they were both young and confident, and the slow-intro gave them no reason to fear each other from the start. By day 12 they were grooming each other. By month two they were sleeping curled together. They're now inseparable parents of six.


Signs it's going well

- Curious sniffing, then walking away calmly
- Eating in the same room without watching each other
- Eventually: grooming, sleeping near each other, play

Signs to slow down

- Flattened ears, swishing tail, hard stare
- Hissing or growling that doesn't ease over a few days
- One cat refusing to eat or use the litter
- Hiding for extended periods

If you see these, drop back a step. There's no rush. Cats relate on a different timeline than humans do.

 **Don't Do This** Don't shortcut this process. The most common multi-cat failure we see is people letting the cats “work it out” face-to-face on day one. Two cats locked in an aggressive interaction can build a fear association that takes years to undo — or never resolves. Slow is fast.

11. ✈️ The Vacation Problem — What to Do When You Travel

This is one of the harder problems with having cats: they don't travel well, and the standard options for leaving them are mostly bad.

Why most options aren't great

- **Boarding kennels.** Loud, smelly, full of unfamiliar dogs and cats, stressful for almost any cat. We don't recommend it unless there's no other option.
- **Leaving food and water out for a few days.** Dangerous. Wet food spoils in hours. Dry food is the wrong diet (Part 2). Litter boxes get disgusting. And if anything goes wrong medically, you won't know.
- **Daily drop-in pet sitter.** Better than the above, but cats are alone most of the day in a way they're not used to — and a stranger appearing once a day can be more stressful than soothing if your cat is skittish.


What we actually use

An in-home sitter who lives in your house while you're gone. This is the gold standard for cats. They stay in their environment, on their schedule, with a human present overnight. No stress of being moved, no kennel, no spoiled food.

We've personally used and *been* sitters on **Trusted Housesitters** — we have 20 five-star reviews from our years of sitting other people's pets while traveling. The model: a sitter stays in your home for free in exchange for taking care of your animals. You vet them through the platform (reviews, ID verification, video calls), they live in your space, your cats stay home.

Why we trust it:


- The reviews are real and verifiable
- Most sitters are experienced and animal-obsessed (they're doing this *because they love animals*, not for money)
- Your cats stay in their own home, with their own bowls, on their own routine
- Many sitters will send daily photos and updates

 **Pouf & Beans IRL** We were Trusted Housesitters sitters for years — and we were really good at it. Twenty five-star reviews across multiple countries, more pets than we can count. So when we recommend the platform, it's from both sides of the experience. We know what a great sitter looks like, and we know what owners worry about.

How to set a sitter up for success


If you use a sitter (Trusted Housesitters or anyone else), a few things make the stay smoother for everyone:

- **Written instructions.** Feeding schedule, water spots, litter routine, vet info, emergency contacts. Don't rely on memory or text messages.
- **Meet beforehand** if possible. A short visit so the cats can meet the sitter, sniff them, get familiar.
- **Leave a worn t-shirt.** Your scent on the bed or in their sleeping spot eases the absence.
- **Be honest about quirks.** Hiders, biters, picky eaters — tell the sitter. They'd rather know.
- **Keep their routine intact.** Same food, same times, same litter. This is not the week to switch anything.

 **The Why Underneath** *A cat at home with a sitter is in their environment with their smells, their spots, their routine — only the human is different. A cat in a kennel has lost everything familiar at once. The first scenario stresses one variable. The second stresses all of them. The difference shows up in how they greet you when you come home.*

12. Build a Morning and Evening Ritual


The rituals don't need to be elaborate. Consistency does the work. Pick one small thing for the start of the day and one for the end, and do them every day.

 **Pouf & Beans IRL** Every night, I pick Pouf up and carry him with me as I turn off the lights. Then in the bathroom I give him a tiny bit of the coconut oil I use to remove my makeup. He loves it (plus it's good for him) — it's become his signal that the day is winding down, and he settles into sleepy time.

A few other ideas to riff on:

- A morning greeting
- A short carry-around tour around the house
- A small healthy treat at a consistent time of day
- A bedtime routine

Do this daily and the relationship deepens on its own.

 **Sources** Dr. Bradley Nelson — [The Emotion Code](#) · [Discover Healing](#) — practitioner directory · [NIH NCCIH — Energy Healing](#) · Cat-directed speech research (Université Paris-Nanterre, 2022) · [Paws of Prey](#) (YouTube) — body language and play behavior · Dr. Lisa Pierson — [catinfo.org](#) · [Trusted Housesitters](#) · [AVSAB — Socialization Position Statement](#)

Chapter 06

Play

Twenty minutes a day of the right kind of play is the highest-leverage thing you can do.

Play isn't optional. For cats, it's how they stay sane.

A cat that doesn't get to hunt doesn't stop being a hunter — the drive just goes somewhere else. Usually your ankles, your furniture, or each other. Twenty focused minutes a day of the right kind of play is one of the highest-leverage things you can do for behavior, weight, sleep, and your bond.


1. 🦴 The Prey Sequence

Every cat is wired to run the same loop:

Stalk → Chase → Pounce → Kill bite → Eat → Groom → Sleep.

A “good” play session walks them through the whole loop — not just the chasing part. End the session with a catch they can actually grab and bite, then feed them, and the loop closes. The cat is satisfied. They groom, they sleep, the apartment stays intact.

End on a chase with no catch, and the loop stays open. That's where you get the 3am zoomies, the redirected biting, and the “why is my cat attacking me” Google searches.

 **The Science Behind It** Cats are obligate predators with a fixed motor pattern. Running the sequence triggers dopamine on the chase, then a parasympathetic drop after the “kill” and meal. Skip the ending and the dopamine has nowhere to go — it comes back out as overstimulation, anxiety, or aggression.

2. 🪶 Wand Toys

Wand toys let you *be* the prey — moving it like a bird, a mouse, or a bug. That's the whole point. A toy left on the floor is a dead thing. A wand toy in your hand is alive.

A few rules we follow:

- **Move it like prey.** Hide it behind furniture. Make it stop. Make it twitch. Don't just wave it around — prey doesn't behave that way.
- **Let them catch it.** A real hunt ends in a catch. Let them grab it, bite it, kick it with their back legs. That's the payoff.


- **Watch what sheds.** See the kitten-safe toys callout in Part 1 — anything with wire, tinsel, or plastic ribbon comes off and gets eaten.


Our favorites are linked in Part 1's resource list: [wand toys](#) and [spring toys](#).

3. ⚡ The Laser — Use With a Payoff

Lasers are great for exercise and *terrible* as a standalone play session — there's no catch, no kill, no payoff. The cat is chasing a thing they can never have. That's the open-loop problem.

But used right, the laser is one of the best workout tools you have.


 **Pouf & Beans IRL** Beans *loves* the laser — we use it for running and exercise when she needs to burn energy. But we always finish with a real toy she can catch, or a meal right after. The laser gets her heart rate up. The catch and the food close the loop.

 **Try This Tonight** Run the laser for 5–10 minutes. The moment they start panting or slowing down, land the dot on a real toy and let them pounce on *that*. Then feed them.

4. 🕒 When to Play

Twice a day, before meals. That's it.

The prey sequence ends in eating — so playing right before food is the most natural setup. Morning and evening matches their natural crepuscular activity peaks. You don't need long sessions; **10–15 focused minutes is plenty** if you're actually moving the toy like prey.

 **The Science Behind It** Cats hunt at dawn and dusk. Playing on that rhythm syncs them to your schedule instead of fighting it — which is why cats with consistent play schedules sleep through the night and the ones without don't.

5. Vertical Territory

Cats live in 3D. Ground level is the most stressful part of the house — it's where the dogs, the vacuum, and the strangers are. Up high is where they relax.

A cat tree, a few wall shelves, or a tall bookshelf they're allowed on isn't a luxury — it's basic environmental enrichment. Multi-cat homes especially need vertical real estate so no one is forced to share a single piece of floor.

See Part 1's resources for the cat tree and shelving we use.

6. Cat TV — The Outdoor Bird Feeder


The best enrichment we ever bought was a \$20 bird feeder.


Hang a [fly-through bird feeder](#) right outside a window with a perch, and your cats now have hours of free, native-prey TV. They chirp, they stalk, they sit transfixed. It costs almost nothing and beats every “interactive cat toy” we've tried.

7. The Catio Pod — Safe Outside Time

Outside time is huge for a cat's nervous system — new smells, real grass, real sun, real wind. But free-roaming cats live ~3–5 years on average; indoor cats live 12–18. The catio splits the difference.

We use a [pop-up octagon catio pod](#) — zip-top netted, easy to set up on a patio or in the grass. Supervised only. The kittens get the outdoor experience without the cars, coyotes, or disease exposure.

 **Pouf & Beans IRL** Twenty minutes in the octagon on a sunny morning will tire them out more than an hour of indoor play. The novelty does the work.

 **Sources** *Paws of Prey* (YouTube) — feline play behavior and the prey sequence · [International Cat Care](#) — Play and predatory behaviour · [American Association of Feline Practitioners](#) — [Environmental Needs Guidelines](#)

Chapter 07

Bringing Them Home

*The first 72 hours shape everything that comes after.
Here's how to do them well.*








The first 72 hours set the tone for everything.

A kitten leaving their littermates and the only home they've known is going through one of the biggest transitions of their life. They don't know your house. They don't know you. They don't know that this is forever. Your job for the first three days is simple: **make their world smaller, quieter, and more predictable than they expect** — and then let them come to you.

1. Before They Arrive — The Setup Checklist


Don't try to give them the run of the whole house on day one. Cats decompress better in small spaces. Pick **one quiet room** — a bedroom or office works perfectly — and set it up before they walk in the door.

In the room:

-  **Food and water bowls** (stainless steel — see Part 2)
-  **The food they were eating with us** (we'll send them home with a starter supply)
-  **Litter box** with the litter they're already used to (we use Tidy Cats BREEZE — see Part 3)
-  **A small soft bed or basket** in a quiet corner
-  **A hiding spot** — an open cardboard box, a covered cat bed, or a t-shirt of yours draped over a chair
-  **One or two familiar things from us** — we'll send a blanket or toy with our scent on it
-  **A wand toy** for when they're ready to play

Out of the room:

- Other pets (introductions come later — see Part 5, §10)
- Loud appliances, vacuums, washers if you can avoid it
- Foot traffic from kids or visitors for the first 48 hours

 **Try This Tonight** Before the kitten arrives, sit on the floor of the room for 10 minutes with the lights low. Notice the sounds, the smells, the corners. That's the world your kitten is about to land in. Adjust anything that feels overwhelming from cat-level.

2. 🕒 The First 24 Hours

Open the carrier in the quiet room, leave the door open, and **walk away**. Don't pull them out. Don't coax them. Sit on the floor, read a book, scroll your phone — let them come out on their own time.

Some kittens bolt out and explore immediately. Some sit in the carrier for an hour. Some hide under the bed for the whole first day. **All of these are normal.**

What to do:


- **Sit on the floor** so you're not towering over them
- **Talk softly** so they get used to your voice
- **Don't chase, don't force handling** — let them set the pace
- **Show them where the litter, food, and water are** by placing them near the hiding spot
- **Leave them alone for sleep** — they'll be exhausted from the transition
- **Hiding** — offer food, treats, or water in their hiding place if they don't come out

What's normal the first few days:

- Hiding
- Not eating much the first day
- Big eyes, low body, slow movements
- Wanting to be near a wall or under furniture

What's *not* normal (call us):

- Not drinking or eating for more than 24 hours
- Labored or open-mouth breathing
- Visible distress (yowling that doesn't stop, panting)
- Diarrhea or vomiting more than once or twice

 **The Science Behind It** A kitten in a new environment runs on cortisol for the first 24–72 hours. Their nervous system is in survey-mode — every smell, sound, and shadow is being catalogued for threat. Hiding is *adaptive*, not a sign of an unhappy kitten. Forcing interaction during this window slows trust-building. Letting them come to you speeds it up.

3. 🌕 Days 2–3 — The Slow Bloom

By day two, most kittens start poking their heads out more. They'll explore the room when you're quiet. They'll eat while you're nearby (even if not yet from your hand). They might come within a foot of you, sniff, and dart back.

This is the bloom. Don't rush it.

What to do:

- **Spend low-pressure time in the room** — sit on the floor, lie on the bed, read out loud
- **Offer food by hand** if they seem curious, or place it close to you and let them come
- **Start playing with a wand toy** at a distance — let the toy be the bridge
- **Begin the bonding rituals from Part 5** — talking, affirmations, soft eye contact, slow blinks

By the end of day three, most kittens will be eating normally, using the litter box reliably, and approaching you on their own. That's the signal they're ready for the next step.


🐾 **Pouf & Beans IRL** Beans was a hider — she spent her first day at our place mostly under the bed. By day two she'd come out to eat if we sat across the room. By day three she was sleeping on the pillow next to my head. Pouf was the opposite — out of the carrier within minutes, exploring everything. Same litter, totally different personalities. Let them be who they are.

4. 🚪 Days 4–7 — Expanding the World

Once your kitten is eating, sleeping, and playing in their starter room with confidence, you can start opening the door. Literally.

- **Prop the door open** while you're home and let them choose to explore at their own pace
- **Keep the starter room as their "safe base"** — food, water, litter, hiding spot still live there
- **Introduce new rooms one at a time** — don't unleash the whole house on day one
- **Watch for stress signals** — flattened ears, low body, tail tucked. If you see them, back up.

If you have other pets, this is where the introduction protocol in **Part 5, §10** kicks in. Slowly. Through a door first. Scent-swap before face-to-face.

 **The Why Underneath** A kitten who decompresses on their own terms learns that you are the constant — the food source, the safe voice, the gentle hand. A kitten who's force-introduced to the whole house in one day learns the opposite: that the environment is unpredictable, and the human is part of the chaos. The first week shapes which story they internalize.

5. When to Actually Worry

Most “is this normal?” moments during decompression are normal. But these are the real red flags:


- **No food for 24+ hours** (kittens, unlike adult cats, can't safely fast — call the vet)
- **No water for 24+ hours**
- **Lethargy beyond the first day** — limp, unresponsive, not just sleeping a lot
- **Vomiting or diarrhea more than twice**
- **Labored breathing or open-mouth panting**
- **Blocked urination** (straining in the litter box with nothing coming out — emergency)
- **A fall or injury you witnessed**

If you're unsure, **call us first**. We know these kittens. We can usually tell you in two minutes whether it's normal decompression or something to take seriously.

6. You Did It

By the end of week one, you'll have a kitten who knows your voice, eats in front of you, sleeps near you, and trusts your hands. From there, everything in Parts 5 and 6 starts to compound.

The first week is the hardest week. After that, the relationship just keeps deepening — for the next fifteen, eighteen, twenty years.

We're rooting for you both. 

— fin —

*If you ever have a question — about food, sleep,
a behavior, a sound they're making, anything —
text us. We mean it.*

Pouf & Beans, and their humans 