Kitten socialization classes are the most unrecognized program and greatest opportunity for cats, and the time is finally right.

The idea started in Australia with Kersti Seksel, BVSc (Hons), MRCVS, MA (Hons), FANZCVS, DACVB, DECAWBM, FAVA (boarded in behavior in the U.S., Europe and Australia). “It all began when my clients in puppy classes wanted equal attention for their cats. Kittens deserve an education too,” she says.

That was about 20 years ago, and her Kitty Kindy classes took off instantly Down Under, but were about as popular in the U.S. as Vegemite (a peanut butter-type spread well-liked in Australia which most Americans detest). Now, it’s all changing in the U.S.—not for Vegemite but for kitten classes. Millennials are particularly attracted to the idea of taking these classes, and veterinary technicians/nurses are particularly well-suited for teaching the classes.

I first heard about kitten classes back in 2004 as a participant/speaker at the NACV Post Graduate Institute and that proverbial light bulb instantly went off in my head when Seksel mentioned her Kitty Kindy classes.

Even then, cats were woefully under-medicalized, and there are a lot of reasons for this. Here are two biggies: Getting cats to the vet can be nearly impossible for some. The carrier comes out, and it’s a mad dash around the house to stuff the protesting cat into the carrier. Also, clients feel guilty about putting their beloved kitty through the ordeal, which gets even worse as the cat’s anxiety and sheer terror grows.

Based on the last studies conducted, cats, on average, visit the veterinarian less than half as often as dogs. Yet, there are about 20 percent more cats compared to dogs. I knew that if we could get cats willingly to hop into their carriers, and not be upset about the car ride to the vet, and the exam was tolerated, (maybe even enjoyed) more clients would be willing to see their veterinarians for preventive cat care. If that happens, cat lives are saved.

So, with Seksel’s blessing and her curriculum, I began to teach kitten classes in various places in Chicago. From a public library to a bank (after business hours) to a dog wash facility (a room not used for dogs)—but ideally these classes are held at veterinary clinics for many reasons.

The kittens are positively exposed to the sights and smells of a veterinary clinic, and a mock exam. As a byproduct, clients become bonded to the clinic. The kitten class instructor—most often a veterinary technician or nurse—becomes a resource when something does ultimately happen years or months later, when the cat begins to urinate outside the box or scratch the furniture.

At first I thought the class should be free, but Seksel correctly pointed out by doing so, I would devalue them. The charge depends on the client base, but something like $25 to $50 per class. With about five kittens in the class, it doesn’t add up to much—but extra money for underpaid technicians/nurses is extra money.

Clearly, the clinic benefits if as adults, the cats regularly visit for preventive care
checkups.

Unlike puppy classes (which too often these days don’t include enough structure), the goal isn’t to create play time. Seksel says; “Socialization isn’t only about play. Socialization is learning to tolerate members of one’s own species as well as members of other species.”

As it turns out, when kittens are outside their carriers (which happens once or twice only briefly during the classes) the vast majority are more interested in interacting with cat toys or humans, than with other kittens.

One of the challenges of the kitten class is to enroll only kittens eight to 15 weeks (although sometimes exact ages of kittens are often unknown). When kittens are over this age, their hard-wired territoriality begins to kick in. No one wants anything but for the kittens to experience the event as a positive experience while they are little sponges.

These days, happily, so many kittens are adopted from shelters. Many shelters do have on-staff veterinarians, who suggest the kitty is in perfect health upon adoption. So, the public perception follows that kittens then have no real need to see a private practitioner. That’s unfortunate, and these classes can readjust this pattern.

In fact, I suggest veterinary clinics partner with an animal shelter on the kitten classes. A shelter volunteer or foster family may attend the kitten class. The “deal” with a shelter is that the shelter recommends a veterinary visit after adoption, and is able to say the kitten being adopted has an advanced kitten graduate degree.

Kitten classes also teach basic kitten care, from clipping kitten’s nails to appropriate ways to play with kittens. For example, telling clients not to use their fingers as a cat toy.

The late Dr. Sophia Yin suggested this idea for classes; using a pill dispenser to periodically feed tuna or moist food. Years later, when a pill is required, the cat is more likely to accept it with the tuna or moist food, all from the pill dispenser. Since behavior problems are so common, prevention is best. The kitten class instructor talks about how to encourage cats to scratch in all the right places (possibly preventing declaw) and offers a lesson in litter box 101.

An overriding message conveyed to students in the class, is that ANYTIME you note a change in your cat’s behavior, contact your veterinarian (not Google).

Kitten classes are typically two one-hour sessions, or one 90-minute class.

There’s a lesson in how to teach kittens to do amazing tricks, like responding when called. Kathy Rupnel, a graduate of a Chicago kitten class says, “I can’t believe it, I actually learned how to teach my cat to come when I called her. Truly, it’s a miracle.”


**ABOUT STEVE DALE**

Steve Dale, CABC, has been a member of the Winn Feline Foundation Board of Directors for thirteen years. Steve is a founding member of the CATalyst Council, and serves on the Board of Directors of the Human Animal Bond Association. He’s a contributor to several books including “The Cat: Clinical Medicine and Management,” edited by Dr. Susan Little; and “Treatment and Care of the Veterinary Geriatric Patient,” edited by Dr. Mary Gardner and Dr. Dani McVety; and he edited “Decoding Your Dog,” authored by members of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists. Steve is the host of three radio talk shows, and he speaks at veterinary and animal welfare conferences around the world. His website is www.stevedalepetworld.com.