

Chapter 1

Getting the Lowdown on Owning a Kitten

In This Chapter

- ▶ Evaluating your lifestyle
- ▶ Raising a healthy kitten
- ▶ Raising a happy kitten
- ▶ Deciding to take in an orphan

You're about to enter that wonderful and sometimes chaotic world of kitten ownership. This chapter helps you make those first important decisions about what kind of kitten to get, how to prepare your home for the new arrival, and how to keep him happy and healthy.

Before you do anything else, I recommend that you take the following quiz to help you evaluate your lifestyle and determine whether you're ready to adopt a kitten and whether a kitten would be happy in your home. You may decide to skip the whole kitten caboodle and adopt a mature, well-adjusted cat. Kittens can be high energy and high maintenance, so weigh your options before taking the plunge.

Can You Fit a Kitty into Your Life?

Not everyone's cut out to live with a kitten. If you're not prepared, that little ball of fur can turn into, well, a pain in the cat. Before you head to the shelter or accept a kitten from a friend, stand back and look at your lifestyle objectively. Ask yourself the following questions:

10 Part I: Your Companion for Life

- ✓ **Am I a neat freak?** If so, a clumsy little kitten knocking over potted plants, tracking litter all over your floors, and leaving balls of fur on your couch cushions may be enough to put you through the roof. Adopt a pet rock instead.
- ✓ **Do I plan to move soon?** If you may not be able to make arrangements to bring your new kitten with you, wait and adopt a kitten after you're settled in your new place.
- ✓ **Does my landlord permit pets, and can I afford the pet deposit?** Arrange to pay your pet deposit before you adopt. Some landlords let you break the payment up over time and pay installments with your monthly rent payments. And don't think a kitten is easy to hide. An unauthorized kitten could have you scrambling for a new home when you get caught and kicked to the curb.
- ✓ **Is my home already crowded with animals, and are my other animals aggressive or territorial?** Crowded pet environments tend to breed behavior problems. If you have aggressive or untrained pets, an innocent kitten may become a midnight snack. On the other paw, kittens make great companions for some older cats and dogs. See Chapter 6 for advice on introducing your new kitten to resident pets.
- ✓ **Am I ready to take on the financial expense of raising a kitten?** Caring for a cat costs somewhere between \$400 and \$700 annually for cat food, litter, vet bills, and other expenses.
- ✓ **Am I having personal problems or going through lifestyle changes like marrying, divorcing, or going off to school?** Even though kittens provide a great deal of comfort when you're going through a stressful time, you may find it impossible to keep him.
- ✓ **Is anyone in my home allergic to cats?** You can do some things to reduce the dander like vacuuming daily and bathing the cat weekly. Allergic folks can also take shots, but if you're not prepared to make the commitment, you may want to adopt a different kind of pet.
- ✓ **Do I work long hours or travel a lot?** A kitten can make the house so friendly to come home to, but a kitten at home by himself can't learn manners and tends to tear up the house. It may be better to adopt an older cat or a pair of cats rather than subjecting a kitten to hours and days of loneliness. If you plan on traveling after you get your kitten, check out all your options in Chapter 12.

Chapter 1: Getting the Lowdown on Owning a Kitten **11**

- ✓ **Do I have young kids under the age of 6?** Most youngsters under 6 don't fully understand that a kitten is alive and not a toy. If you do have young kids, you may want to wait until they're a little older to adopt a kitten, or consider adopting a mature cat who's used to living with small kids. If you feel your youngster can handle the kitten gently, be sure to teach her respect for the kitten before it arrives (see Chapter 6). Also plan to monitor your child's time with the kitten.
- ✓ **Do I have time to train and play with my kitten to avoid behavioral problems?** Raising a happy, well-socialized cat with good manners takes work. He needs to be taught what's expected and he needs exercise and entertainment (see Chapter 15). If you don't have the time, your cute little ball of energy can turn into a large out-of-control pain in the neck.
- ✓ **Am I willing to make time to groom my kitten regularly?** If you have a busy schedule that leaves little time for combing kitty, you may want to consider a shorthaired kitten instead of a longhaired breed such as a Persian. For more information on kitten maintenance, see Chapter 11.
- ✓ **Can I make the 18-year commitment?** Raising a kitten takes a special person with a real commitment. An inside cat can live 15 to 20 years. That's as long as it takes to raise a child. Ask yourself if you're up to making that kind of commitment.

Forget dog years: What's that in cat years?

Did you know that an inside kitten can live for 15 to 20 years? Forget the old wives' tale that one trip around the sun equals 7 kitty years. The following table shows you how your kitten's years really tick along.

Cat Years	Human Years	Cat Years	Human Years
1	15	12	36
2	24	15	76
5	36	18	88
6	45	21	100

12 Part I: Your Companion for Life

If you feel strongly that a kitten would be a welcome addition to your home, be sure to read Chapters 2, 3, and 4, where I help you weigh your kitten options: indoor versus outdoor, registered versus random bred, longhaired versus short, adopting from a shelter versus responding to an ad and so on.

Keeping Kitten Healthy

A healthy kitten doesn't just happen. As the owner, you need to be proactive, because your kitty can't tell you when she feels sick. You should start as soon as you bring her home — maybe even before. Take the kitten to get checked out within the first week at home; or before you bring her home if you have other cats. If you don't have a vet already, check out Chapter 6.

You need to play voyeur when your kitten poops and pees, feel for lumps and bumps during her monthly exam (see Chapter 10), and watch for signs she's just under the weather. Take her to the vet annually and keep her current on her vaccinations. You can find out about the most common and deadly viruses and their vaccinations in Chapters 9 and 10.

You must make some important decisions about your kitten's health and well-being. One of the most important decisions you can make about your kitten's future is whether to have him (or her) fixed. Just a simple snip as early as 8 weeks old can mean the difference between your boy cat peeing on the wall or properly in the litter box. If you decide not to spay your girl, you may get less sleep because every few weeks she's going to keep you awake all night yowling because she's in heat. And early altering prevents several forms of cancer and other illnesses.

As with kids, kittens occasionally get sick or hurt. They're still young and vulnerable, with immature immune systems. You can find more detailed information on common kitten illnesses in Chapter 9 and about responding in case of emergencies in Chapter 20.



Keeping kitty healthy takes more than vaccinating and worming — you need to exercise him mentally and physically to keep him entertained and out of trouble. I tell you how to wear him out when you're home and while you're away in Chapter 15, so he wants to snooze at the same time you do.

Keeping Kitten Happy

Kittens keep you on your toes and challenge your imagination. You're going to need to put some effort into keeping your new friend safe and entertained. You need to search your home for objects, chemicals, and plants that have the potential to hurt your kitten. You also need to find out the difference between food that nourishes your kitten and something that can harm him. You need to give him things to do and introduce him to the house rules.

Preparing for a warm homecoming

Like a newborn baby coming from the hospital, your kitten needs some accessories to make life easier for him and you. Start your shopping spree by buying a cat carrier so you can bring him home in safety. You can find out about all the cool stuff kittens need in Chapter 5. In Chapter 6 I tell you how to set up a *safe room* — a small quiet room where he can feel secure as he gets acquainted with your family.



Before you bring your kitten home or as soon as possible afterward, get down on your hands and knees and think like a kitten. Remove everything you can find that the new king of the house can chew, swallow, push over, or get tangled in. Pick up any loose string, loose screws, rubber bands, toxic plants, and so on. Chapter 8 has a long list of dangerous things to watch out for when kitten-proofing your home.

Feeding to keep him fit and trim

Feed your kitten a quality diet. Spending a few extra cents per meal on better food is like collecting dividends on an investment. After all, it keeps your kitten healthier, and that pays off big when she gets older. Find out all about the best foods to feed your kitten in Chapter 7.

Occupying his every waking hour

Kittens aren't as high maintenance as puppies are, but they still need plenty of love, attention, and patience. Taking the time for the right kind of play helps you bond with your kitten. It also makes her less likely to seek out trouble around the house.

14 Part I: Your Companion for Life

Opening Your Home to an Orphan

Few things tug at your heart the way a lost or orphaned kitten does. So I give you the lowdown on what to do when you come across a needy little kitten. In Chapter 16 I tell you what to do and where to turn for help when trying to rescue a weaned kitten, and in Chapter 17 I go over how to raise a bottle baby. I also give you some tips on health and behavioral issues that orphans have in Chapter 18. Finally, in Chapter 19, I tell you what to do with your little friend when he gets big enough to live without your constant attention and help you decide whether you want to keep him or find a new home. Raising an orphan is a lot of work, but the process isn't as complicated as most people think.