

Why weaning is a big deal

The weaning process has been discussed and debated for years, researching into best practises, 'how to', 'when to', and so on. I am not a veterinary surgeon, but as a specialist in feline behaviour, I am here to give you the 'whys' from a behavioural perspective.

As with any species, many factors contribute to the timing and nature of the weaning process, for example the number, sex and size of offspring being nursed, the mothers condition, the breed, early experiences of the mother and environmental safety.

Kitten development

To fully understand the natural weaning process of the feline, it is important to recognise the natural pattern of behavioural development of the species.

Pulling the vast bulk of research on this topic together, we can see that there is a set sequence of events that need to occur across a number of weeks to provide kittens with adequate skills to stay fit and healthy through adulthood.

By two weeks of age, the kitten displays rudimentary walking (more shuffling or crawling), some visual orientation (without clarity as yet), and the teeth have begun to erupt.¹

Continuing to mature in the third week, weaning commences at four weeks of age.² This does not however mean that kittens are ready to wean at four weeks of age straight away, please remember that this is naturally a very gradual process, day-by-day, step-by-step, the queen teaching her litter about life as a healthy cat.

This fourth week brings with it a huge learning curve for the kittens, learning to go on between queen and her kittens. At this stage, alongside sensory development, the kitten develops the ability to walk out of the nest and social play commences.

So you can see that at this stage the mother has started introducing solid foods, the kittens begin to learn of the environment outside of the nest, motor skills develop and confidence builds within this safety zone.

This development continues, with the queen continuing to introduce solids, gradually teaching the kittens about prey types. By week seven, kittens develop the run, would have made initial attempts at predatory behaviours (after much practice with littermates) they develop obstacle avoidance, as well as social communication (i.e. tail lifting, paw posturing and so on) Visual acuity is vastly improved, voluntary elimination has matured, and sleeping patterns begin to reflect the patterns of adult cat sleep.³

By week ten, the vestibular system has matured and complex motor manoeuvres begin (continuing until 12 months of age) Visual acuity is still maturing, although still incomplete at this stage.

What happens if these steps are interfered with at too great an extent?

Detailing the various ways in which many aspects of behaviour can be affected through early weaning practises in depth would prove rather difficult for one article feature. So as a starting point, it would be most beneficial to cover a specific theory that has stood the test of time, across a range of species including the domestic cat.

Attachment theory⁴ is one of the most studied aspects of psychology today. The first and most well known view on attachment theory is that of John Bowlby, the father of attachment theory. He found that certain relationships, or attachments, are formed from birth to continue throughout life. The first attachment figure in the felines' case is the queen.

It is within this first relationship that a kitten learns how to behave, survive and adapt. Looking at the

above steps, you can see just how much learning the kitten has to overcome in order to stay healthy and safe as an adult. As a result, interruption of this process has huge affects on the kittens' development.

To categorise the affects, four key areas can be identified ^{5,6} :

1. PHYSICAL – research has found that poor attachments can lead to poor physical development.
2. INTELLECTUAL – on top of this, poor attachments have been linked to intellectual impairment, e.g. adaptation, problem solving.
3. EMOTIONAL - poor attachments have also been associated with heightened arousal levels, leading to decreased ability to cope with the changes that our domestic environments often require from our pets.
4. SOCIAL - poor attachments can be related to impaired social skills, i.e. poorer abilities to communicate and relate to other cats.
This is often a problem when managing multi-cat households, whereby one cat cannot cope with other members and may adopt a stress-related behaviour such as urinating within the home.

When to Wean?

With this information you can see that there is no one single answer to this question. Timings would depend on a range of factors, but the key points to think about for a specific case would be;

1. The condition of the queen.
This refers to both health condition (seek veterinary advice) or mental state. For example, referring to previous articles, if the queen has been displaying any signs of stress pre-birth onwards, she may feel the need to wean (even abandon) her litter sooner than would naturally happen.
It is always best to resolve any behavioural, anxiety-related issues with any cat that is due to be bred from, as this will ensure happy, healthy kittens, raised to cope with our domestic world.
2. The environmental situation that the queen is raising her litter in.
For example, has a nesting site been chosen considering all instinctual drives of the cat. Refer to October's article for a checklist detailing appropriate environments.
3. The size, sex and number of offspring within the litter.
Although this cannot be helped behaviourally, if the queen has been set up adequately, she will be relaxed enough to cope with the situation and judge her nursing accordingly.

With our domestic weaning processes, it is often not so much the timing of weaning, but the nature. With this information, think about how progressively gradual this weaning process would naturally occur. The kitten would naturally be learning about their world step-by-step, bit-by-bit, this is with humans as well as the objects, scents, tastes, etc. of the home in this situation.

So to ensure happy, healthy kittens are produced in each litter

- A. PREPARE the queen, mentally as well as physically.
- B. ALLOW natural behaviours to be acted upon.
- C. TAKE TIME to teach kittens about us and our world in a step-by-step manner, replicating the natural process as much as possible.

I hope this provides a good starting point for all. Please feel free to contact me for further advice or recommended reading references, I am always happy to help.

References

- ^{1, 2, 3} Turner D.C. und Bateson P. (1988) *The domestic cat: the biology of its behaviour*, Cambridge University Press, UK
- ⁴ Bowlby, J. (1988) *A Secure Base*, Basic Books, New York, US
- ⁵ Newberry, R. and Swanson, J. (2008) Implications of breaking mother–young social bonds, *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, Vol.110, No.1-2, pp.3-23
- ⁶ Bowlby, J. (1973) *Attachment and Loss. Vol 2: Separation: Anxiety and Anger*, Basic Books, New York, US