

## Are They Supposed to Do That? Normal/Abnormal Behavior in Puppies & Kittens and How to Help Them



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The pandemic caused a boom in adoption and purchase of puppies and kittens. Sources of these pets vary from Craigslist to shelters of all kinds to Facebook to reputable and not-reputable breeders. Many new owners have not even met the person from whom they are getting their new family member, and have not met the pet or its relatives if purchased. They have not seen the shelter it came from and are not aware of how transport may have had an effect on its behavior.



Many new owners are ill-prepared to care for a puppy or kitten:

- They are not familiar with how to make the transition smooth for the pet
- They are not familiar with typical puppy and/or kitten behavior, e.g.:
  - Housebreaking for puppies
  - Litterbox training for kittens
  - Biting
  - Destructive behavior
  - House “rules,” e.g. counter-surfing or walking on counters
  - The extent to which a pet will go to get attention from owners

With so little knowledge of “normal” behavior problems, new owners are especially at risk of getting terrible advice from neighbors and, of course, the Internet, about their new pet’s behavior. Without the assessment of a knowledgeable professional, normal behavior can be made worse with some training methods.

Abnormal behavior can be misconstrued as “dominant” or “bossy,” when the underlying causes may be:

- Fear
- Anxiety
- Medical problems

Hopefully, the owner will consult their vet, who can ask the correct questions/observe behavior in situ or by video.

### Normal Behavior = Biting

Puppies and kittens bite. If they get more attention for biting – even in the form of scolding- biting will increase.

- Substitutes for biting should be safe and given to the pet before they bite
- Danger of behavior “chains” whereby the pet bites and is “redirected” to another item
- Biting can be a result of fear, and can be aggressive:
  - If they are punished for biting, biting could worsen in severity.
  - Heavy-handed owners can frighten their new pet, who then bites to avoid being scruffed/grabbed/struck
  - Behavior triggered by fear could have been triggered before they got the pet, and has to be counter-conditioned to rebuild trust/reduce fear and anxiety
  - Alternative behaviors to biting have to be devised and taught to owners



### Normal Behavior = Urination/Defecation

The new environment has to be set up so that it is easy for the puppy or kitten to find the right place to eliminate. “Abnormal” elimination, e.g. intractable house soiling can be caused by:

- Medical problems
- Separation anxiety in dogs
- Improper cleaning of soiled areas
- Punishment when there is an accident
- In kittens: aversion to litter, territorial issues, substrate preferences



### Normal Behavior = Fear

All puppies and/or kittens will exhibit fear to some extent

- It is abnormal if a new pet hides for long periods of time for more than a few days in the new environment
- Though we expect to see them be afraid of loud noises and new stimuli in the environment, even afraid of certain types of people, normal behavior is that they not only recover but adjust over time to the scary stimulus.
- Even if they are very scared, a short period of counter-conditioning should ameliorate the problem.
- If not treated properly, fear can become aggression.



*Angell.org/dogtraining provides details on training classes at the MSPCA-Angell. For those faced with more challenging behavior issues, visit [angell.org/behavior](http://angell.org/behavior) for details on our Behavior services.*