



Kittens Learning Litter Boxes: How to avoid “litter-ally” digging yourself into a hole

When it comes to learning proper bathroom habits, cats are pros. Kittens as young as 3 weeks old can be seen practicing burying what they eliminate in soft, sandy surfaces. This urge comes from the instinctual desire to cover the scent of their leavings, either from predators, prey, or rival cats. In homes, we humans have harnessed this urge to make our lives easier. However, some kittens need more help than others to build desirable litter box habits.

The BEST way by far to manage inappropriate elimination (IE) in kittens is to manage their environment so they have the greatest chance of getting it right. Then you can gradually fade the “helpful” measures as they build the right habits. This means doing things a little differently at first, but trust me, it’s worth it! When you bring your kitten home:

- **Confine your kitten to a single, small room for at least 5-7 days.** The *biggest* contributing factor in cases of kitten IE is too much space! They have too many options for where to “go,” which can lead to them making mistakes, and those habits can be hard to break! This “litter learning zone” makes success more likely.
- **Start off with multiple boxes.** We like to use the n+1 model, with n being number of kittens. Ex. if you have 1 kittens, use 2 boxes, etc. This means your kittens will have the greatest opportunity to choose the right place to eliminate.
- **Make sure those boxes are kitten friendly.** This means starting with open boxes with low sides (less than 2 inches). No electronic boxes, and no litter box liners. Once your kitten has the hang of the litter box, you can gradually introduce them to other styles if desired.
- **Leave a LITTLE waste in the box to begin with.** When you do clean the box, leave a *very* small bit of poop or urine in an out of the way corner of the box. Again, this is only during their transition until they are using the box habitually.
- **Only give them access to ONE sleeping area/bed in their sanctuary room.** Kittens can choose to bury poop in blankets, so during the transition make sure that the only blanket they have is the one they sleep on.
- **Gradually transition after at least 5 days of consistent use.** Once your kitten has at least 5 days of consistent litter box use, you can begin to gradually make changes to their environment.
- **For very young kittens: be ready to clean around the box.** Kittens who are 2-6 weeks old will often attempt to use the litter box correctly—and miss! They generally get better with practice but be ready to clean any messes around the box with an enzymatic cleaner (see below).
- **Optional: steer clear of clumping litter for very young kittens.** Many veterinarians will recommend not to use clumping litter for very young kittens, as a small percentage will sometimes choose to eat it. Non clumping litter is much less dangerous for their tummies if ingested. You can gradually transition to a clumping litter once they have the hang of it if desired.

That’s all well and good, but what if your kitten is ALREADY exhibiting problems like pooping in laundry, or in the bathtub?

FIRST: SEEK MEDICAL ADVICE. Always. *Especially* if the IE is accompanied by diarrhea, vomiting, lethargy, or blood.

Decrease space. As above, confine your kitten to a litter learning zone.

Is the litter the problem? Does it sizzle with baking soda? Is it strongly scented? Some cats can be very picky about litter.

Is the box the problem? Is it too high, does it make noise, is it too difficult to enter/exit?

Is it the location? Is the litter box too far from a “safe” hiding spot? This can be a factor for many fearful cats.

Remove alternatives: Make sure the only soft surface available is their sleeping spot.

Remove competing cats: Many cats guard litter boxes or use them as ambush points. Try separation from new cats.

Try litter attractants: You can purchase products that are designed to entice cats to dig in the litter box.

Use enzymatic cleaners: Make sure you clean any mess with an enzymatic cleaner such as Anti Icky Poo. Most cleaners (even “pet odor” specific ones) don’t contain the necessary compounds to break down the chemicals in urine.

Take punishment out of your training vocabulary. This can and will create negative associations with the litter box itself, which is entirely counter productive to building desirable habits.