Later weaning shown to reduce behavioural problems in cats

With around 100 million domestic cats estimated to be living in Europe, they are quite possibly the most popular pet. Yet, despite the clear incentive to maximise well-being both for our feline friends and so ourselves, remarkedly little research has gone into their early socialisation – until now.

SOCIETY

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Research has been conducted into the detrimental impact of early weaning – the point at which an infant is separated from its mother – in a variety of species. Yet, despite being the most popular companion animal with early weaning common, no such studies had until recently been conducted on cats. This, despite the presumption of the link between early weaning and feline behavioural problems.

Prevailing wisdom traditionally holds that cat socialisation takes place within 8 weeks after birth and after this point behaviour is not majorly affected by social experiences. However, a recent study published in the journal Scientific Reports suggests that delaying weaning can make a marked difference.

The pursuit of feline well-being

The study was based on results from research previously conducted by Professor Hannes Lohi of the University of Helsinki's Faculty of Veterinary Science and was partially supported by the EU-funded ERA-NET NEURON II network (now closed). His group had undertaken a health and behaviour survey with around 6 000 cats, making it the most extensive cat behaviour database in the world. Feline behavioural problems can include shyness, stereotypic wool sucking, excessive grooming and

aggression.

Using these results this latest study found that feline behavioural problems are more common than expected, with mild behavioural problems reported in more than 80% of cats. As doctoral student Milla Ahola summarises, ‘The age of weaning has an impact on the cat's later behaviour. Cats weaned under the age of 8 weeks displayed more aggression and stereotypic behaviour. Cats weaned in adulthood had fewer such problems than other cats. Cats weaned at 14 weeks of age had fewer behavioural problems than cats weaned earlier.’

The researchers found that behavioural changes were also linked, with increased aggression also correlating with increased stereotypic behaviour. This suggested to the team a neurological connection which they suggest is to be found with changes in the neurotransmitters of the basal ganglia.

These findings that early separation from the mother leads to a higher prevalence of behavioural problems are also backed up by studies on other animal species such as rodents, monkeys and mink. It is suggested that humans have also exhibited a similar phenomenon. Previous research has found that early weaning can lead to a range of neurobiological changes, such as impaired memory and cognition.

The study actually found that benefits were to be accrued by even going beyond the 12 week minimum before a cat should be removed from its mother recommended in Finland, by an additional two, taking it to 14 weeks. The team is now planning to collect more data and extending its investigation to look at the inclusion of more environmental factors such as maternal care, living conditions before weaning, socialisation, and post-weaning living conditions, as well as looking at whether breeds are differentially influenced by weaning age.

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