



SOCIALIZING FERAL KITTENS

Feral *cats* are not socialized to people—and can't be adopted. With some time and attention, however, you can work with young feral kittens to help them become affectionate and loving companions. It's not a transformation that happens overnight—socializing kittens is a big commitment—but it's a very rewarding experience.

Kittens who do not have any contact with humans after they are born will be feral, regardless of whether their mother is a lost house cat or a feral cat living in a colony. They will be frightened of people and demonstrate all of the signs of fear and anxiety that an adult cat would, like spitting, hissing, and running from human contact.

To become pets, they will need to be socialized, or taught to be comfortable around people. If the kittens are eight weeks or younger, usually just about anyone can socialize them by following some simple steps. Kittens older than two months (eight weeks) of age often take more time and skill to socialize. Learn how to determine kitten age at www.alleycat.org/Kittens, or turn to page 5.

**Note: Alley Cat Allies does not recommend attempting to socialize adult feral cats or kittens older than four months of age. Learn more at www.alleycat.org/TNRnotTNA.*

Socializing kittens is a big responsibility, but with patience and effort, your hissing feral kitten can become the cat who curls up on your lap for some cuddling. Follow these tips to get organized and gather all the supplies you need.

To Tame or Not to Tame

You've got a decision to make. Your first instinct when you see kittens may be to swoop them up and take them home with you, but that is not always in the best interest of the kittens—or you. Socializing and caring for feral kittens is a

time-consuming process which requires devotion, patience, and attention. The decision to bring feral kittens into your home should not be taken lightly.

Before you move forward consider:

- 1. Time:** Do you have the time it takes to socialize kittens? You will have to commit to caring for them one-on-one for at least a couple of hours each day, for a period of a few weeks to a month or longer. If the kittens are neonatal, they will require even more specialized care, including round-the clock bottle-feeding. Make sure you know ahead of time what this entails (learn more at www.alleycat.org/Kittens). Sadly, people often bring feral kittens into their home and then do not take the time to work with them. Weeks, or months, later, they realize that they cannot touch the cat—they have feral cats in their home that cannot be adopted.
- 2. Adoption Expertise and Connections:** After socializing the kittens, they will need adoptive homes. Do you have the network—friends, acquaintances, organizations—to help you find those homes? Finding and screening homes for kittens takes work. Consider the paperwork required—



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adoption fees, forms, and contracts—as well as your ability to get the kittens neutered before adoption when deciding whether to socialize them or not.

**Note: Alley Cat Allies recommends early-age spay/neuter. A kitten can be neutered as long as it weighs two pounds. Learn more at www.alleycat.org/EarlyAge.*

- 3. Kitten Age:** Healthy kittens four months of age or older can stay in their colony. These kittens should be neutered, vaccinated, and returned to their outdoor home. See page 5 for more information about determining kitten age and visit www.alleycat.org/Kittens.

Do's and Don'ts of Kitten Socialization

Veterinary Care

- Have a well-kitten visit at the veterinarian; make sure kittens are FVRCP vaccinated and dewormed if necessary.

**Note: Rabies vaccination can't be given until they are four-months-old.)*

- Get immediate veterinary attention if the kittens become lethargic, stop eating, or have diarrhea.

Kitten Age

- Assess kitten age as soon as you have them in your care using our guidelines on page 5, also available at www.alleycat.org/Kittens. Knowing a kitten's age is extremely important for determining the proper care regimen and whether to socialize her or return her to her colony.



Confinement

- Keep kittens in a room that can be closed off, like a bathroom or spare bedroom. Set up a cage for them inside the room. This will give you easy access and won't give them an opportunity to hide in a hard-to-reach spot. This small space will also calm them and allow them to easily

find their food, water, and litter, while keeping any pets or small children away.

- Provide a safe zone—or 'den' (such as a small box with blankets or a feral cat den)—in the kittens' cage. This hiding place provides security, and gives them a way to feel comfortable and not threatened. Kittens must feel relaxed in your home.
- Use the proper cage to confine your kittens. If they are extremely small, use nylon cages—not wire—so they can't escape through bars. The cage should be large enough to hold the den, food and water dishes, a litter box, and soft, comfortable bedding. See page 3 for equipment suggestions.
- Make sure that room is kitten-proofed, so if they get out of your hands, they will still be safe. You don't want them to be able to crawl under doorways or furniture or into vents—anywhere that is difficult for you to reach, or is dangerous for them.

Socialization

Getting comfortable – Follow these tips to make kittens feel more at home and prepare them for socialization.

- Give kittens an initial two-day adjustment period after trapping before you begin holding them.
- Set the kittens' crate up off floor so they feel more comfortable. Felines feel safer if they are higher and not at ground level.
- Move slowly and speak softly around the kittens. If you wear shoes indoors, consider slippers or socks around the kittens. Don't play loud music or musical instruments.
- Don't keep the kittens confined away from the household action. Leave a TV or radio on after the kittens have been in your home for a few days, so they become accustomed to human voices and sounds. If exposure to other pets is not an issue, set the whole crate in a busy living room with a TV playing.
- For young kittens, a ticking clock wrapped in a towel sounds like a mother cat's heartbeat and is very soothing.
- Kittens will respond to positive experiences. Reward positive behaviors and prevent negative experiences like scolding or confrontations with other pets.
- Gauge each kitten's ability to learn and become accustomed to you. Evaluate each individually—don't go by set rules.
- Spitting, hissing and hiding are all expressions of fear; be patient and do not mistake these signs for aggression.

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- If a litter of kittens are slow to socialize, consider separating them. Isolating the kittens forces them to rely on people. If you can't, make sure you spend quality time alone with each one. Litters can be put back together after a short adjustment period.

Socializing with Food – Food is the key to socialization. Providing the kitten with food creates an incentive for the kitten to interact with you and forms a positive association, ensuring that she connects you with the food she loves so much.

- You may keep dry kitten food out all day. When you feed wet food, stay in the room while the kittens eat it, so they associate you with food and begin to trust you.
- If the kittens are very timid, try to first give them food on a spoon through the cage.
- Over time, gradually move the food plate closer to your body while you sit in the room, until the plate is in your lap and the kittens are comfortable crawling on you to get to it.
- Pet and handle the kittens for the first time while they are eating, so they have an incentive to stay put. Start petting around the face, chin, and behind the ears and work up to petting all over.
- Gradually work up to holding kittens, making sure to reward them with some canned cat food or chicken-flavored baby food on a spoon. Human baby food, especially chicken flavor, is a special incentive for kittens. (Make sure the baby food has no onion—it's toxic to cats.)
- Don't offer food to kittens on your finger or allow kittens to play with your hand or bite or scratch you. A bite from even a young kitten can be painful and dangerous and it teaches the kittens that biting is acceptable behavior. This rule is especially important when raising single kittens without siblings.

Socializing with Touch and Play – All young kittens should be picked up often to be petted, brushed, and played with so they are used to this behavior when they grow up.

- If you haven't separated the kittens, take time to socialize each of them individually. Handling them away from the group can speed up the socialization process by making them more dependent on you.
- Devote about two hours per day for successful socialization. You can do a few long sessions or several shorter sessions.
- Get down to the kittens' level and play with them; particularly kittens eight weeks and younger.



- Hold the kittens as much as possible. Make sure they are close to your body so they feel your body warmth and heart beat. This is especially productive after they have eaten, so they associate you with the food and the cuddles.
- Use toys to entice kittens to play at around three to four weeks.
- If a kitten is particularly feisty, put her in a front carrying pack (see equipment list on page 4) or papoose her in a towel with only the head out and hold her while doing things around the house.
- After kittens are comfortable enough with you to fall asleep on your lap or purr in your presence, they can move from the initial confinement space to a larger, kitten-proof room.

Introduce New Friends – Your goal is to socialize the kittens so that they are comfortable around all people and pets and will be happy in their new homes, so introduce them to new some faces!

- As long as all are healthy, you can introduce kittens to an adult socialized cat. A neutered tom will likely play and groom the kittens, which helps the socialization process.

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- Introduce kittens to as many people as you can to adjust them to strangers and unexpected circumstances.
- If there are other friendly animals in your household, exposing kittens to them will only help the kittens socialization.

Precautions – Even a scratch from a kitten can hurt. Make sure you know how to properly handle feisty kittens!

- Aggressive feral kittens can hurt you badly if you are not careful. Wear gloves or protective clothing if you feel it is needed.
- Sometimes you have to scruff kittens by the back of their neck to gain control. Learn how to safely scruff a kitten as shown in photo at right. Use your entire hand and gently but firmly grasp the fur on back of neck without pinching, pull the cat up, and immediately support her hind legs.



Keeping Kittens Safe

- Do not use toxic cleaning products or leave them in the room with kittens, including Lysol® or wet wipes.
- For clean-ups, use diluted bleach solutions (one part bleach to 15 parts water) in small amounts.
- If kittens are in your bathroom, pull the shower curtain up and out of the way, so they don't climb it.
- Take ALL knick-knacks out of the room (i.e., perfume bottles, soap bottles, jewelry, figurines, etc.)
- Do not allow very young children to play with or help socialize the kittens. They are not old enough to understand and react to the temperament and behavior of feral kittens.
- Don't keep kittens in a room with a "La-Z-Boy®" (reclining) chair. The kittens can be injured or killed if they go inside the chair and accidentally get closed underneath.

Tools of the Trade (Equipment, etc.)

- Cages
 - Large dog wire crate
 - Cat Condo
<http://www.petedge.com/product/Home-Kennel/Cages-Crates/Cages-Crates/Easy-Cat-Cage/pc/194/c/310/sc/502/55204.uts>
 - Lightweight nylon portable soft crate (daytripper sold for canine transport)
<http://www.midwestpetproducts.com/product/DAYTRIPPER?gclid=CJSL15f7n6MCFRVlswod8Vm9oQ>
- Gloves
- Treats, like human baby food (without onion)
- Bedding materials
- Cat food
- Dens or other safe nesting items
- Nylon front pack – hands free vest carrier for socializing
- Interactive toys, such as balls, rope toys, and crinkle toys
- Radio (tuned to talk radio) and CD with common household noise (TV, dishwasher, vacuum cleaner, etc.)

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Determine the Age of Feral Kittens

You can see more photos online at www.alleycat.org/Kittens from day 1 to 10-weeks old.

One Week or 3-8 ounces

Eyes are shut, ears are folded down, and kittens are unable to walk. They can purr and make tiny noises. The umbilical cord may still be visible.



One-Three Weeks or 8-11 ounces

Eyes start to open (they are blue) and focus. Ears begin to open and movement is improved to crawling, snuggling, and kneading.



Three Weeks or 7.5-14.5 ounces

Eyes fully open and ears are open and standing up. The kitten will start to respond to noises and movement. The first wobbly steps are taken and baby teeth start to come in.



Four-Five Weeks or 8-16.75 ounces

Running, playing, digging, and pouncing occur often. Kittens will start to wean and will be able to lap up formula, eat soft food, and use the litter box by themselves. Eyes have fully changed from blue to their adult color.



Eight Weeks or 2 pounds

Kittens look like little versions of full grown cats. This is the best age at which to begin the socialization process.

