

# Feral Kittens and Pregnant Cats: Guidelines for Fostering and Socializing

Female feral cats usually look for safe, hidden places to give birth. The young offspring learn from their mothers to be wary and distrustful of humans. The tiny kittens will spit and hiss if approached by humans, and though small, will bite and scratch if not handled properly. When dealing with feral kittens, as with any wild animal, you should have a pre-exposure rabies vaccination and keep your tetanus shot current. Minimize all risks by using the correct equipment.

In most areas of the U.S., except northern regions with extreme cold, kitten season can extend from February through November. Most kittens, however, are born during spring. Cats can have three litters each year, although two are more likely, with a gestation period of approximately 65 days.

Kitten mortality rates are usually very high — often around 75 percent (Nutter et al., 2004). Kittens are at their most vulnerable before weaning (before 12 weeks of age) (Fournier et al., 2016; Johnson, 2022), with 60-80 percent of kitten deaths occurring before their eighth week (Hollinger, 2016). Many become sick from diseases that are treatable, such as upper respiratory

infections (URIs). Without medical care and supportive treatment, weak kittens usually perish. Those kittens who survive this initial period often build up immunities to common diseases, and once a colony has been sterilized and stabilized, most of the cats remain healthy and viable for many years under the care and supervision of caretakers.

## To Tame or TNR?

If your local shelter is euthanizing domestic kittens for lack of homes, you may want to consider trapping any pregnant feral females and having them spayed. You can also TNR any kittens when they are eight to twelve weeks old and return them to the colony. Even at the young age of twelve weeks old, many kittens may be difficult to socialize; returning them to the colony will allow more tame kittens to be adopted from shelters. Peter Neville notes that even under ideal conditions “around 15 percent of kittens seem to resist socialization and demonstrate only limited willingness to become generally sociable adults” (Neville, 1992).

The critical socialization period of a feral kitten is from two to seven weeks of age. Researchers at the Waltham Centre for Pet Nutrition in Great Britain have found that friendliness is also passed along to kittens from the mother or father, meaning that some kittens may retain their feral instincts no matter how well they are socialized (Jablonski, accessed 2014).

The process of taming kittens can take four to eight weeks, depending on their age and degree of wildness.



Alley Cat Rescue

*Spring brings lots of mama cats and babies.*

Any person attempting this process should be patient and committed. Be cautious when working with feral kittens. Remember they are wild and will defend themselves if they feel cornered or threatened.

Be aware that a young feral cat who may be completely tame and loving with one person can revert to her wild state when placed in another home. It can sometimes take six months or longer for that cat to bond with the new caretaker.

Alley Cat Rescue strongly advises that kittens be spayed or neutered before being placed in adoptive homes. The end goal is to stop the killing of healthy animals in shelters. Sterilization of domestic animals is, by a significant margin, one of the greatest contributors to the reduction of animal euthanasia in the United States (Rowan & Kartal, 2018).

## What to Do If You Find Feral Kittens

It is not uncommon, especially during “kitten season,” to find a litter of unattended kittens, or a seemingly orphaned kitten by itself. Chances are, however, that the mother cat is somewhere nearby. She may be watching from a distance, or off searching for food. Sometimes the mother cat may leave her kittens alone for several hours. If you find a single kitten alone, the mother may be in the process of moving her litter from one location to another.

**Although it may be tempting to jump in and help, take the following steps before doing anything.**

1. Assess the kittens' apparent health.
  - Does their fur look healthy, full, and fluffy? Or are the kittens dirty and looking sickly?
  - Are they sleeping quietly, huddled together? Or are they crying?

- Are they dry, or wet?

If the kittens look sickly, dirty, wet, or are crying, bring them indoors as it is likely they are not being cared for by their mother. Otherwise, go on to step 2.

2. Assess the environment.
  - Are the kittens in immediate danger from rain, wet weather, or the cold?
  - Are there potential predators around, such as raccoons or dogs?
  - Is there nearby traffic, like pedestrian foot traffic, bicycles or cars?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, you should move the kittens to a nearby safer location, close enough for the mother to find them, or in the case of weather concerns, provide a simple shelter for them. Then proceed to step 3.

3. After assessing the situation, if you determine that the kittens are healthy and in a safe location, it is best to wait and watch to see if the mother will return. You should stay at least 35 feet away, but the farther the better. Do not place food near the kittens to try to entice the mother to return. She almost always hides her litter away from food sources to protect them from other cats or predators.

4. In some cases you may need to leave the area completely and check back in four to six hours to see if the kittens are still okay. The mother will most likely not return until she no longer senses the presence of humans, especially if she is feral. Keep in mind that healthy kittens can survive several hours without food as long as they are warm. Hypothermia is a much greater risk than starvation for neonatal kittens.

If the mother returns and you've determined the area is relatively safe, leave

the kittens alone until they are weaned at approximately five to six weeks old. You can monitor the area from a distance and offer shelter and food, but keep the two apart from one another. Remember, mom won't use the shelter if food is nearby. Once the kittens are old enough, you can trap them, so that they can be seen by a veterinarian, socialized, spayed/neutered, and, hopefully, adopted.

***Remember, it is extremely important that you also trap the mother cat and take her in to be spayed so that she will not continue to give birth to litters on the streets.***

In the event that the mother does *not* return and it becomes apparent that the kittens are in need of human intervention, remove the kittens as soon as possible. However, you must also be prepared to provide them with the care they need to thrive. Taking in young kittens is a big commitment. They require a tremendous amount of care and attention. If you feel you are not capable of providing them with

the care that they need, you can try contacting your local animal shelters to see if they have any available volunteers to take the kittens in.

## Trapping Feral Kittens

Kittens will make themselves visible when they are about four to six weeks old. ACR recommends trapping kittens between the ages of five and eight weeks, when they have developed enough to leave their mother but are still young enough to be tamed.

Use baited traps for safe handling and transporting. While they may look just like any domestic kitten, they have wild instincts. Always wear gloves or long sleeves when handling feral kittens and never underestimate their quickness.

## How to Safely Foster a Feral Kitten

All kittens should receive their first vaccines by six to eight weeks of age. Your veterinarian will administer a series of vaccines at three- or four-week intervals until the kittens reach 16 weeks of age. Rabies vaccines can be given as early as 12 weeks of age. If fostering kittens too young to receive vaccines, it is important to use caution when allowing the kittens to interact with other cats.

It is also important to treat for internal and external parasites around six weeks of age. The majority of feral kittens are born with internal parasites, such as roundworms, and have external parasites, such as fleas and ear mites. Parasites can cause loss of appetite, diarrhea, anemia, and can be deadly for a kitten. Most internal and



Shaída Tala Sabin

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external parasites can be treated with a topical medication, such as Advantage Multi.

When kittens reach about eight weeks of age and weigh around two pounds, they should be sterilized. Take care to ensure their incision sites remain clean and heal properly. A long-lasting antibiotic injection, such as Convenia, should be administered.

Begin the taming process by confining the kitten to a large cage in a quiet spare room or bathroom. Adding a cat den or small box to the cage will help the kitten feel safer and more comfortable. Line the cage with newspaper and provide a litter box, along with food, water, and kitten milk replacer in a bowl.

For the first day, do not attempt to handle the kitten. She must first learn to feel safe. Set up the cage in a quiet environment and visit her frequently. Talk to her so she gets used to your voice. You can also turn on a radio or TV for her to get used to human voices. Remember to always move slowly and quietly.

If the kitten needs to be medicated, use liquid medicine in moist food, or crush tablets into baby food. Whole tablets should not be administered to a feral kitten or cat because it may cause trauma and can undo the taming process. It also increases your risk of getting bitten.

If the kitten escapes from confinement, do not grab her with your bare hands. Use gloves or a carrier to catch her.

## Caring for Orphaned and Newborn Kittens

If kittens are under five weeks of age and unable to eat solid food, bottle-feed them with a commercial kitten formula (*Goat's Milk* KMR or *Breeder's Edge*). Cow's milk

does not contain enough fat or protein for kittens. Make sure you hold the kitten upright and do not force too much milk into her mouth or the fluid will go into her lungs and she could aspirate.

Young kittens should be kept in a box lined with absorbent paper towels; make sure they stay dry. Keep the box warm (around 90 degrees F) during the first two weeks of life using a heating pad covered with a towel, or you can use an infrared lamp. It's very important to keep kittens warm.

For three-week-old kittens, decrease the temperature to around 80 degrees F. If a kitten is too weak to drink from a bottle, feed her with an eye dropper. Massage the belly to stimulate digestion, and use a cotton ball or paper towel to stimulate elimination of urine and feces after each feeding. Moist cotton balls can be used to clean the area afterwards. Rub Vaseline on the



Louise Holton

*Orphaned feral kitten fostered and bottle-fed by the author.*

anal area. The mother usually cleans the babies during the first few weeks so you will have to take on this task.

Begin weaning from three to four weeks old. Mix canned kitten food with kitten milk formula and hand feed until the kittens are accustomed to eating on their own, then gradually change over completely to canned food.

If you do not have kitten formula on hand, use the following formula for temporary feeding only (12 to 24 hours): Add one egg yolk to eight ounces of cow's or goat's milk. Feed kittens two tablespoons per four ounces of body weight daily. Divide total amount into equal feedings. Small, weak kittens should be fed every three to four hours.

The milk that is produced by the mother cat for the first two days after birth is called colostrum. This milk is high in protein and antibodies that protect the newborn kittens. Orphan kittens who do not have this protection should be vaccinated against rhinotracheitis, calicivirus, and panleukopenia at four weeks of age. Vaccination at an early age should only be considered for orphaned kittens. If kittens remain with their mothers, they should receive their first vaccinations at eight to ten weeks of age, when they lose their maternally derived immunity.

## Common Infection Diseases

Kittens are susceptible to respiratory diseases such as those caused by feline herpesvirus and calicivirus. Panleukopenia (feline distemper) and feline leukemia (FeLV) may be contracted in utero. Panleukopenia, if contracted before birth, can result in cerebellar hypoplasia, which causes balance and walking problems in a kitten that start at two to three weeks of age. In unvaccinated populations, feline distemper is a very deadly and contagious disease.

Respiratory diseases cause sneezing, coughing, and nasal discharge. The most probable cause is either rhinotracheitis or calicivirus. Often the disease becomes chronic and sometimes cannot be completely cured. The cat may sneeze or have runny eyes for most of her life.

A mild case can be treated by providing a warm environment, cleaning the eyes and nose areas, and using a vaporizer. Antibiotics will not help treat URIs, which are viral infections, but are sometimes used to combat secondary bacterial infections. Conjunctivitis of the eyes requires constant cleaning with moist, warm cotton balls and application of Terramycin or Chlorasone a few times per day directly into the eyes. If left untreated, upper respiratory infections can cause severe health problems, pneumonia, eventual blindness, or even death.



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*It is critical to begin the socialization process for feral kittens early, between two and seven weeks of age.*

Refer to the chapter on “Health Care for Feral Cats: Guidelines for Colony Caretakers” for more information.

## How to Tame Feral Kittens

After you have given the kittens about two days to settle in, select the least aggressive kitten, place a towel firmly around the kitten's body and pick her up. Keep her wrapped securely in the towel as you remove her from the cage and set her on your lap. If the kitten stays calm, pet her gently

on the head from behind. Never approach from the front. Initially, hands will frighten feral kittens and they may bite when approached from the front. Continue to softly pet her head while you talk to her in a soothing voice. Some kittens may respond quickly to being petted, while others may take more time adjusting. Practice this step several times a day for several days, until each kitten is comfortable with being picked up and petted.

You can also offer the kittens baby food from a spoon to help increase trust and build up their courage. Food can be a great incentive when taming a feral kitten; just make sure if using baby food, you only use plain meat-based food.

As the kittens become more comfortable with being handled, you can try to pet them without the towel. Gently hold the kitten on your lap. Some kittens may get scared and want to jump from your lap, so be prepared to wrap the towel back around her; but be careful not to scare her. Go through this process with each kitten. Repeat this handling process as frequently as possible.

Within about a week the kittens should have made progress. Remember that each kitten will develop at a different rate. As the kittens become more comfortable being around you and other humans, they should be allowed access to the entire room. It is important to limit hiding places and make sure the door to the room remains closed. Continue to make frequent visits to handle and play with the kittens. Use toys to encourage interaction and build trust.

Toys are a great way to distract a kitten, while discreetly petting her. Provide a variety of scratch posts to train them on appropriate scratching areas.

If there is another tame cat in the house who enjoys the company of kittens, this will help the taming process. Kittens are

“copycats” and will follow the tame cat’s behavior. Remember to always use caution when introducing new cats.

Please note, you should also be prepared to find barn homes or a sanctuary for any kittens who are unable to be socialized. No matter how much time has passed and how much effort you put into taming a feral kitten, some individuals do not warm up to human contact and will remain feral for life. It is in the best interest of the kitten to be placed in an appropriate outdoor home, rather than forcing her to live indoors if this is not the environment suited for her.

### *Placement in Adoptive Homes*

Sadly, most people who wish to adopt a cat want a friendly, fully socialized animal. Some people are afraid to tell potential new adopters that kittens were once feral, for fear they will not be placed. Alley Cat Rescue believes this is not in the best interest of the kitten. The cats or kittens may retain some feral instincts and it is important to disclose this information to the adopter. “Unsocialized” or “not completely socialized” can be more appealing words to use when describing the kittens, rather than saying “feral.”

People’s perceptions about feral cats need to change. Education is important, and people must be made aware of the millions of feral cats living in alleys who need our understanding and our help, not fear and disdain. Most people who have lived with cats before will understand that many are shy and can act wild at times.

Feral kittens do best if there are no very young children in the home. The most suitable home is a calm environment so the kittens feel secure. Ideally, two kittens should be placed together in a home, or with another cat or friendly dog, or where an adult person is at home part of the day. The taming process is extremely rewarding. Many tamed feral cats will continue to be a



bit elusive, while others will demand human contact constantly.

When a feral kitten is placed into a new home, ACR strongly recommends that the new guardian go through a similar “mini-taming” process with the kitten. The new home may be very confusing and scary at first; Most kittens soon settle down happily into their new environment and start enjoying the luxuries offered.

Refer to “Guidelines for Establishing an Effective Adoption Program” for more information on rehoming cats and kittens and “Guidelines for Safely Relocating Feral Cats” if a barn home is necessary.

## Caring for Pregnant Feral Cats

As discussed previously in the chapter on “Steps for Successful Trapping,” there are several options to consider before trapping a pregnant feral cat. All available options should be discussed with your veterinarian so an appropriate course of action can be established.

Feral cats may become stressed when they are held in captivity. Stress can cause illness and a mother’s inability to properly care for her kittens, especially when giving birth. Providing a safe, quiet place for her, where she won’t be disturbed, will minimize any stress and reduce the risk of birthing complications.

To safely foster a feral mother cat (or any feral cat) you will need a large cage and a cat den for her to hide in to feel safe. Keep the cage in a spare bedroom. Line the cage with newspaper and provide fresh, clean towels. Cover the top of the cage with sheets to give her a safe environment. Limit your access to the room and the cage.

Leave her alone to give birth in a quiet en-

vironment. Some of the kittens could die, either at birth or from viral infections. If the mother does not show any interest in caring for a particular kitten, it is usually because she instinctively knows the kitten is not going to survive. Try to encourage the mother to care for any kittens she is ignoring, but only do this safely — don’t stress her. If she clearly is not going to care for a particular kitten(s), you will need to remove the kitten and begin bottle feeding as described above.

The mother cat should allow all kittens to nurse. She should be washing and grooming them regularly. Make sure the mother is also taking care of herself: eating/drinking, going to the bathroom, and cleaning herself. Monitor the mother as much as possible for signs of upper respiratory infection, diarrhea, and any other common illnesses. A mother with a viral or bacterial infection can pass them on to her kittens so if she seems ill, consult a veterinarian.

When the kittens are around two to three weeks old, you can attempt to pet them. Mothers can be very protective of their young, so take extreme caution. The easiest way to begin the taming process is to sneak pets when you are cleaning the cage. The more you work with them and the mother cat, the easier and faster it will be for them to become socialized. (Refer to “Adopting an Adult Feral Cat” for more information.)

## Conclusion

Fostering cats and kittens in a home environment can be an enjoyable and rewarding experience, and it also frees up shelter space, so more cats can be assisted. However, it is important to keep in mind that being a foster parent means increased responsibility; most cats and kittens who need to be fostered require a lot of time and energy to prepare them for adoption. Prior to fostering, make sure you are fully

aware of and fully equipped for what it means to be a foster parent. For more detailed information on fostering cats and kittens, and guidelines for establishing

your own foster program, please refer to Addendum 3. An example foster parent agreement form can also be found at the end of the handbook.