Caring for Orphaned Kittens

In most cases, kittens receive all the nutritional support they need from their mother, however, if the mother cat abandons or rejects her young, becomes too ill to care for them, or dies, young kittens will need assistance in order to survive. Caring for young kittens is no easy task and requires a lot of time and energy. Mother cats know best, so hand raising kittens should only be undertaken if absolutely necessary. If you find a litter of kittens in your yard, before bringing them indoors for care, first make certain the mother cat is not coming back; give her some time, she might be out in search of food and will return shortly.

Getting Started

If a litter of kittens needs to be hand raised, here are a few important items to keep in mind.
Newborn kittens require:

- A caretaker who can support them around the clock, day and night
  - By providing a consistent feeding schedule, every 2-3 hours
  - By stimulating bowl movements before and after feedings
- A clean, warm and quiet environment, with a safe and constant heat source
- A strict hygiene routine to prevent disease
- A positive and enriching environment where they can learn normal kitten behavior that they would learn from a mother cat

Items you will need to properly foster kittens:

- Kitten Milk Replacer (KMR), Similac, Just Born (find at pet supply stores or from a vet)
- Bottle, eye dropper, syringe
- Canned kitten food
- Heating pad, hot water bottle, or infrared lamp
- Soft, fleece blankets
- Soft washcloths
- Paper towels, tissues
- Mild, liquid dish soap
- Carrier or kennel; a box will work for kittens 1-2 weeks old
- Shallow litter pan (cardboard trays canned cat food comes in work great)
- Litter (non-clumping)
- Stuffed toys
Creating A Warm, Quiet Environment (Temperature is Key)

Prepare a quiet space for the kittens, preferably a spare room with a door that closes to keep them quarantined from other animals, noise, and getting into trouble. Make sure they cannot climb up a curtain, pull down a lamp, fall into a toilet, eat a toxic plant or other hazard in a trash can, etc. Keep them in a carrier, kennel, or other structure for their safety.

Small kittens cannot regulate their body temperature that well, so you will need to create a cozy “nest” for them by placing a heating pad or hot water bottle under a soft blanket; make sure it’s not too hot that the kittens will get burned. For kittens 2 weeks of age and younger, maintain a temperature of around 90 degrees F; kittens around 3 weeks old, decrease the temperature to 80 degrees F. Keep the kittens warm but allow them to move off of the heating pad if they become too warm. Place a stuffed animal in with the kittens to give them something to snuggle with.

Feeding Requirements

It’s vital that kittens receive their mother’s first milk, or colostrum, which contains antibodies to help build their immune system and fight off disease. Kittens absorb colostrum in the first 16 to 24 hours after being born; kittens should feed within the first two hours of being born.

If kittens are under 5 weeks of age and unable to eat solid food on their own, you will need to bottle-feed them kitten formula (KMR, Similac, or Just Born). Do NOT feed kittens cow’s or goat’s milk, that can be very dangerous; only use formula specifically for kittens. If a kitten is too weak or does not take to drinking from a bottle, feed her with an eye dropper or syringe. Make sure you hold the kitten upright (do NOT cradle like a human baby) and do NOT force too much milk into her mouth or the fluid could go into her lungs and she could aspirate.

Follow the instructions on the formula container for proper mixing; it’s best to use powdered formula and mix a new batch with every feeding. Make sure the formula is warm but not hot; test on the inside of your wrist. Follow the below feeding schedule; overfeeding a kitten is just as dangerous as underfeeding:

- Kittens 2 weeks old and younger, feed every 2 hours
- Kittens 3 weeks old, feed every 3 hours
- Kittens 4 weeks old, feed every 4 hours
- Kittens 5 weeks old, feed every 5-6 hours and begin to wean

Hypoglycemia

A kitten is hypoglycemic when she has low blood sugar. This occurs from inadequate or infrequent feedings. If a kitten is not eating, take her to a vet immediately. Low blood sugar can result in severe depression, muscle twitching, and convulsions. They can deteriorate very rapidly.

Bathroom Requirements

Kittens start to go to the bathroom on their own at 3 to 4 weeks old. Younger kittens are stimulated by the mother to pee and poop. The caretaker of orphaned kittens must take over this role, by stimu-
lating each kitten before and after every feeding. Using a soft paper towel, tissue, or washcloth – make it wet with warm water – gently rub the kitten’s bottom to encourage her to go to the bathroom. Continue to rub while she is relieving herself (so she doesn’t stop), and do this for a few minutes until she is done.

**Constipation and Diarrhea**
Don’t be concerned if a kitten doesn’t poop with every stimulation, but she should go on a pretty regular schedule. If a kitten goes without pooping in 24 hours, she might be constipated. Normal kitten poop should be the consistence of toothpaste. For minor cases of constipation, try diluting the formula with a bit more water. You also add a few drops of mineral oil to the mixed formula as a laxative. For mild cases of diarrhea, try using less water when mixing the formula or try adding either (human) baby rice cereal or a probiotic (FortiFlora) to the kitten formula. If a kitten does not regain a normal poop after home attempts following 48 hours, she should be taken to a vet as soon as possible, as either constipation or diarrhea can be life-threatening for a kitten.

**Litter Box Training**
Around the 3- to 4-week mark, as you continue to bottle fed and stimulate the kittens, begin to place each one in the center of a shallow litter box and gently use her front paws to dig in the litter. Most kittens know instinctually to use a litter box, though you should also encourage this behavior since there is no mother cat present to lead by example. Use a non-clumping litter, like Yesterday’s News, to prevent litter from caking to their fur and to avoid accidental ingestion.

**Proper Hygiene**

Because kittens have weakened immune systems, proper hygiene is of the utmost importance. After every stimulation, each kitten should be cleaned with a warm, wet tissue or cloth. Gently wash the kitten’s bottom to prevent urine and feces from drying on delicate skin and fur. Also clean the kitten’s face, just like her mother would do, to prevent formula from sticking to her fur.

If a kitten becomes particular dirty, you can give her a bath but use caution; again keeping kittens warm and dry is vital. Under warm running water, only wash the area that is dirty; do NOT immerse the entire kitten in water. Use a mild dish liquid and make sure to rinse thoroughly. Gently dry the kitten with a soft towel and immediately place her on a heating pad.

In addition to keeping the kittens clean, it is important to keep their sleeping area clean by changing soiled blankets and make sure to properly disinfect all bowls, bottles, syringes, etc. Kittens have weakened immune systems, therefore maintaining a strict hygiene protocol is essential.

**Stick to a Schedule**

Getting kittens on a routine is very important. You will want to feed and stimulate a kitten every 2 to 4 hours depending on age. A proper schedule for kittens should look like this:

1. Stimulate to go to the bathroom
2. Feed
3. Stimulate again
4. Clean/Wash bottom and face
5. Return to cozy nest for sleeping

**Found a Litter of Kittens Outside**

If you find a litter of kittens in your yard, it’s important to first access the situation before swooping in to rescue them. Do the kittens look warm, pudgy, well taken care of? If they do, then the mother cat is most likely nearby (in search of food) and she will return shortly; leave the kittens where they are. If the kittens appear to be cold, wet, thin, sick, or under duress, with no sign of the mother cat, bring the kittens indoors immediately.

If you decide the kittens need to be rescued, the next step is to determine what condition they are in. If any of the kittens look extremely thin, dehydrated, sick, or injured, take them to a vet immediately. If a kitten is gasping for breath, suffering from an eye or nose (upper respiratory) infection, bleeding, or limp/lethargic, she is in need of emergency care.

If all of the kittens appear to be stable and in healthy condition, take them home and follow these steps:

1. Warm them up, especially if they appear to be cold/shivering. You do NOT want to feed cold kittens.
2. Feed them following the above chart, according to age; most abandoned kittens will have been without food for too long.
3. Stimulate kittens under 3 weeks of age to go to the bathroom, following the above guidelines. If the kittens are older, place them in the litter box.
4. Place them in their “nest” so they can settle in and get some sleep. Kittens require a lot of sleep, so make sure their area is cozy, quiet, and warm.

**Veterinary Care**

**Dehydration**

Dehydration can be fatal in a kitten. To check to see if a kitten is dehydrated, pinch the skin on the back of her neck. If the skin quickly falls back into place, the kitten is properly hydrated. If the skin stays standing upright and takes awhile to fall back into place, the kitten is dehydrated.

If you have the knowledge of administering subcutaneous fluids, proceed by giving fluids. If you don’t have access to fluids, feed the kitten flavorless pedialyte by using an eye dropper or syringe. If a kitten hasn’t responded to pedialyte or fluids and is severely dehydrated to her to a vet immediately.

**Fading Kitten Syndrome**

Kittens have a high mortality rate and those without a mother to feed and care for them are at greater risk of not surviving, even despite your best efforts of handling raising. Fading kitten syndrome refers to a list of problems and conditions that can cause death in young kittens and this usually happens within the first two weeks of life. Causes of kitten fading syndrome can come from environ-
mental factors (maternal neglect), or it can be physical (congenital birth defects, low birth weight, anemia); various infections (upper respiratory infections) also can play a role. Kittens are very fragile, when they are born. There are a lot of things that can go wrong for a kitten, but if you keep them warm, make sure they’re nursing, and monitor for signs of infection, you can prevent problems.

Most kittens who die from fading kitten syndrome appear to get sick and die suddenly, although cases of hypothermia and trauma are problems that generally build gradually and are very difficult to detect until a crisis develops. The key to preventing fading kitten syndrome is early detection of subtle problems before a crisis occurs. Kittens can fade within a matter of minutes or hours and emergency medical treatment should be sought immediately. Symptoms are:

- Lethargy
- Trouble breathing/low respiratory rate
- Low body temperature
- Pale gums
- Failure to nurse

Keep a close eye on the smallest kitten in the litter, any kitten who is not gaining weight, and any kittens who are not eating. If a kitten dies from a litter, it is recommended that all remaining kittens be checked by a vet to rule out any underlying conditions or infections.

**Fleas**

Only treat kittens for fleas if you see fleas or flea dirt. Do NOT use chemical flea treatments on kittens under 6 weeks of age; this can be fatal. Instead wash the kittens using a mild dish liquid under warm water to remove fleas and dirt. Thoroughly dry the kittens, place on a heating pad.

Kittens older than 6 weeks can be treated with a chemical flea application. Only use a treatment specifically designed for kittens and apply the correct dosage appropriate to each kitten’s weight. Overdosing a kitten with flea treatment can be fatal.

**Worms**

It’s important to treat kittens for worms, because worms wreak havoc on the GI tract, causing diarrhea and malnutrition. Have a vet properly dispense any dewormer medications; dosage is determined by a kitten’s weight. The most common worms found in kittens are roundworms and hookworms; these can be treated with Pyrantel. If kittens have fleas, they most likely have tape-worms, which are treated by Praziquantel.

**Vaccinations**

When kittens are around 6 weeks of age, you will need to schedule a vet checkup and so they can be given their first distemper (FVRCP) vaccine, with two follow-up booster vaccines. And around 8 weeks of age, they will need to receive a rabies vaccine (required by law).

**Testing for FeLV/FIV**

All kittens to be placed up for adoption should be tested for FeLV/FIV. Knowing if a kitten has either disease will also help provide a better picture into a cat’s future health and lifestyle. Note that a
positive result does NOT mean a death sentence for a kitten and most will live long, healthy lives. Learn more about FeLV and FIV on our website.

**Spay/Neuter**

Once they weigh 2 pounds, which is usually around 8 weeks of age, the kittens are old enough to be spayed or neutered. Early-age or pediatric spay/neuter is very safe and the recovery time is usually very quick. Learn more about early-age spay/neuter on our website.

**Weaning Kittens Off of Bottle Feeding**

For healthy kittens who are around 4 weeks old, you will want to gradually transition them from feeding from a bottle (formula) to eating from a shallow bowl (canned, wet kitten food). Do NOT go from feeding a kitten formula directly to canned food; make sure you transition her slowly or this will upset her GI tract and can cause diarrhea or constipation.

To do this, you will mix up the kitten formula as usual and also add in a small amount of canned kitten food to the formula to create a “slurry.” Over time you will gradually increase the amount of kitten food to the mixture, so you have more canned food versus formula. Continue feeding the kittens from a bottle and slowly transition them to eating from a shallow bowl. Kittens are used to suckling, so they need to slowly learn to chew their food.

Begin by mixing 2 parts water to 1 part formula, with some extra water to thin out the mixture; slurry can become a bit thick, so extra water is needed. Add about a half of a can (2.9 oz) of kitten food and mix well; make sure the mixture is smooth with no lumps (a soup-like consistence). Pour the slurry into a bottle – you will most likely need to cut the hole in the nipple a bit larger so the slurry can flow out – and bottle feed a kitten like normal.

As you increase the amount of canned food to the formula and the mixture becomes thicker, you can have them lick the slurry from your fingers. The next step is to pour the slurry into a shallow bowl, so they can begin to eat on their own. At this age (4 to 5 weeks old), you will be feeding them every 5 hours or so, and you will also be transitioning them to use a litter box. Continue to encourage them to go to the bathroom by stimulation, but also put them in a litter box so they learn that is the appropriate place to relieve themselves; with the introduction of solid food, the kittens will begin to go to the bathroom on their own.

**Behavioral Development**

Kittens learn what is normal and safe when they are very young between 2 and 8 weeks of age. This developmental stage is an important socialization period. Having lots of positive experiences – sights, sounds, smells, textures – means kittens will be better able to adapt to their environment in the future. Kittens who are not exposed to different experiences during this period are more likely to be fearful and more reserved. Make sure normal domestic experiences are introduced in a gentle and positive manner, for example hearing the vacuum cleaner or taking rides in the car to the vet, or these experiences could do more harm than good. Making the most for opportunities during this socialization period will help the kittens be well-adjusted and sociable for the rest of their lives.